SEPTEMBER

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Western Trails

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TWIN TRIGGERS AND A CRIMSON LEGACY

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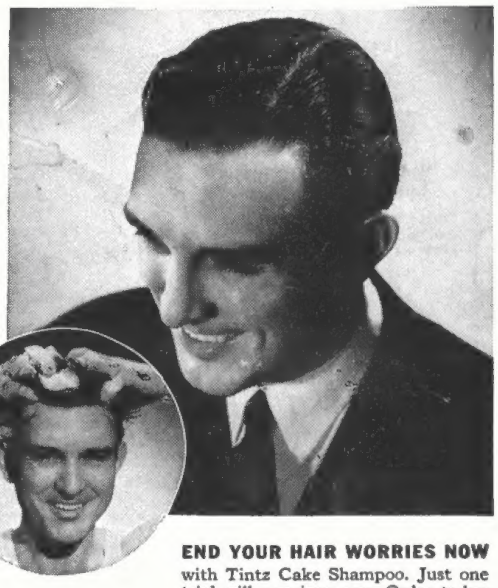

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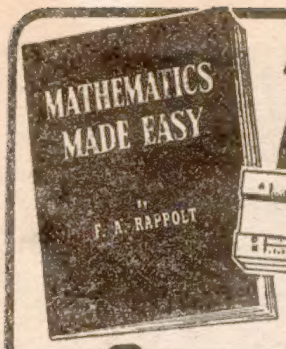

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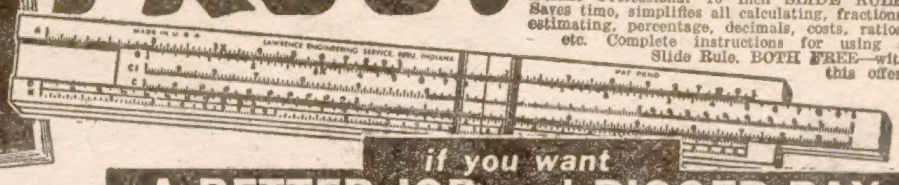

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SEPT. 1942

Western Trails

Vol. XXXV No. 4

A. A. WYN, Editor

An ACE Magazine

TWIN TRIGGERS AND A CRIMSON LEGACY (Novelette) . . . . . J. Edward Leithead 6

He inherits a sheep ranch—and a partnership in a crooked combine.

ONE-MAN VIGILANTE . . . . . Anson Hard 35

This younker becomes a man overnight when he stakes a claim that sprouts a bullet bonanza.

DEAD END TRAIL . . . . . Ney N. Geer 44

A grim warning informs Ed Duane that an unknown enemy is after his scalp.

RENEGADE FROM THE BADLANDS (Novelette) . . Galen C. Colin 56

Drygulch guns send Marshal Buck Rowley on a desperado mission.

TRAIL-MATES' TREACHERY . . . . . Quentin Nindorf 83

Snap Noebell becomes an outcast from the badlands—and posse bait for the law.

BOOT HILL SANCTUARY . . . . . Orlando Rigoni 94

This oldster's silence lines him up in the cross-fire of a gun-fannin' feud.

STAMPEDE 99

Powder River Bill and his writin' rannyhans.

BLACKSMITH'S BLACK MAGIC . . . . . L. P. Holmes 101

Sidewinders throw a long rope round Lawman Powers' job.

Cover by Norm Saunders

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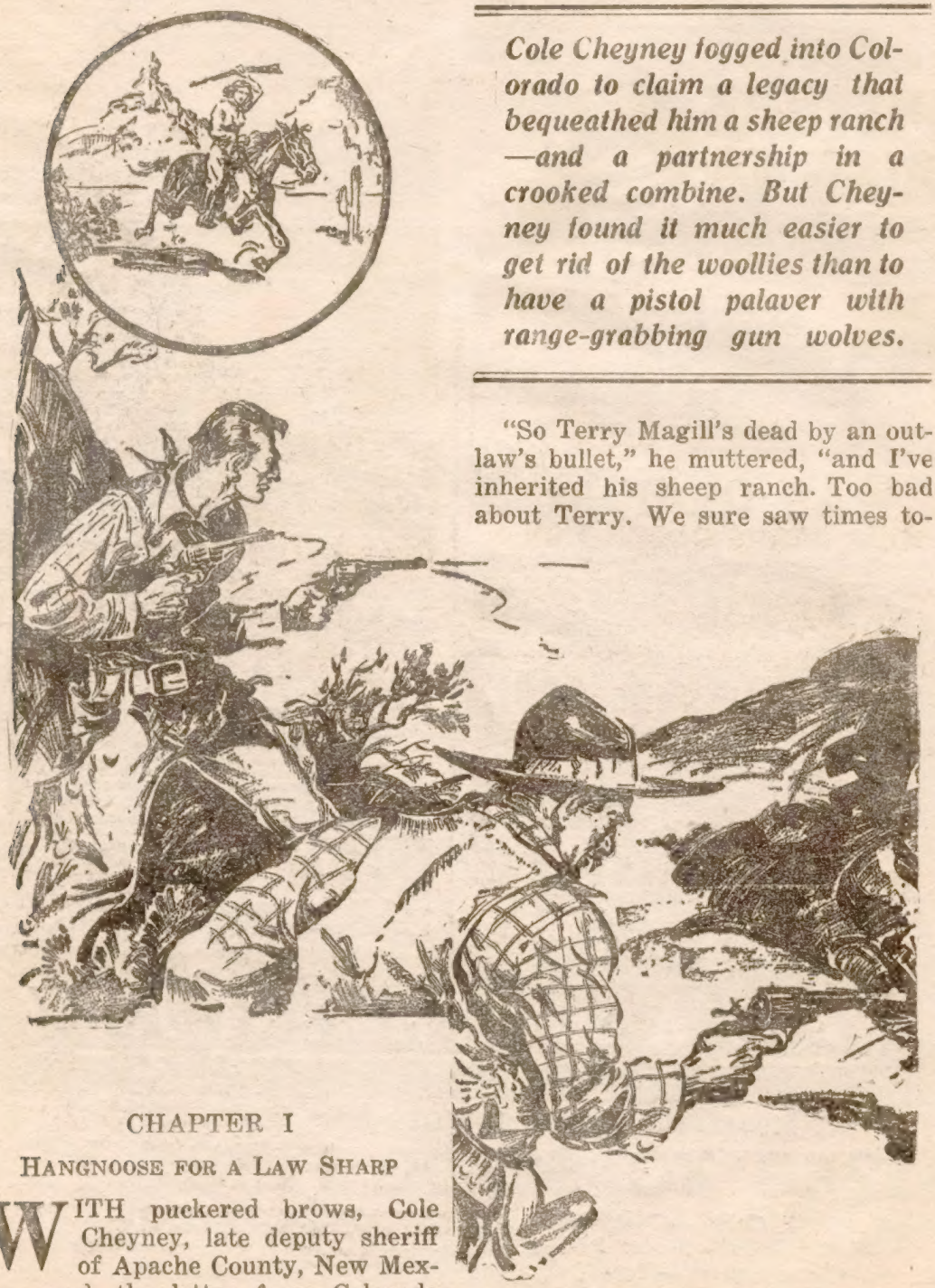


Cole Cheyney togged into Colorado to claim a legacy that bequeathed him a sheep ranch —and a partnership in a crooked combine. But Cheyney found it much easier to get rid of the woollies than to have a pistol palaver with range-grabbing gun wolves.

"So Terry Magill's dead by an outlaw's bullet," he muttered, "and I've inherited his sheep ranch. Too bad about Terry. We sure saw times to-

CHAPTER I

HANGNOOSE FOR A LAW SHARP

WITH puckered brows, Cole Cheyney, late deputy sheriff of Apache County, New Mexico, read the letter from Colorado through for the third time.

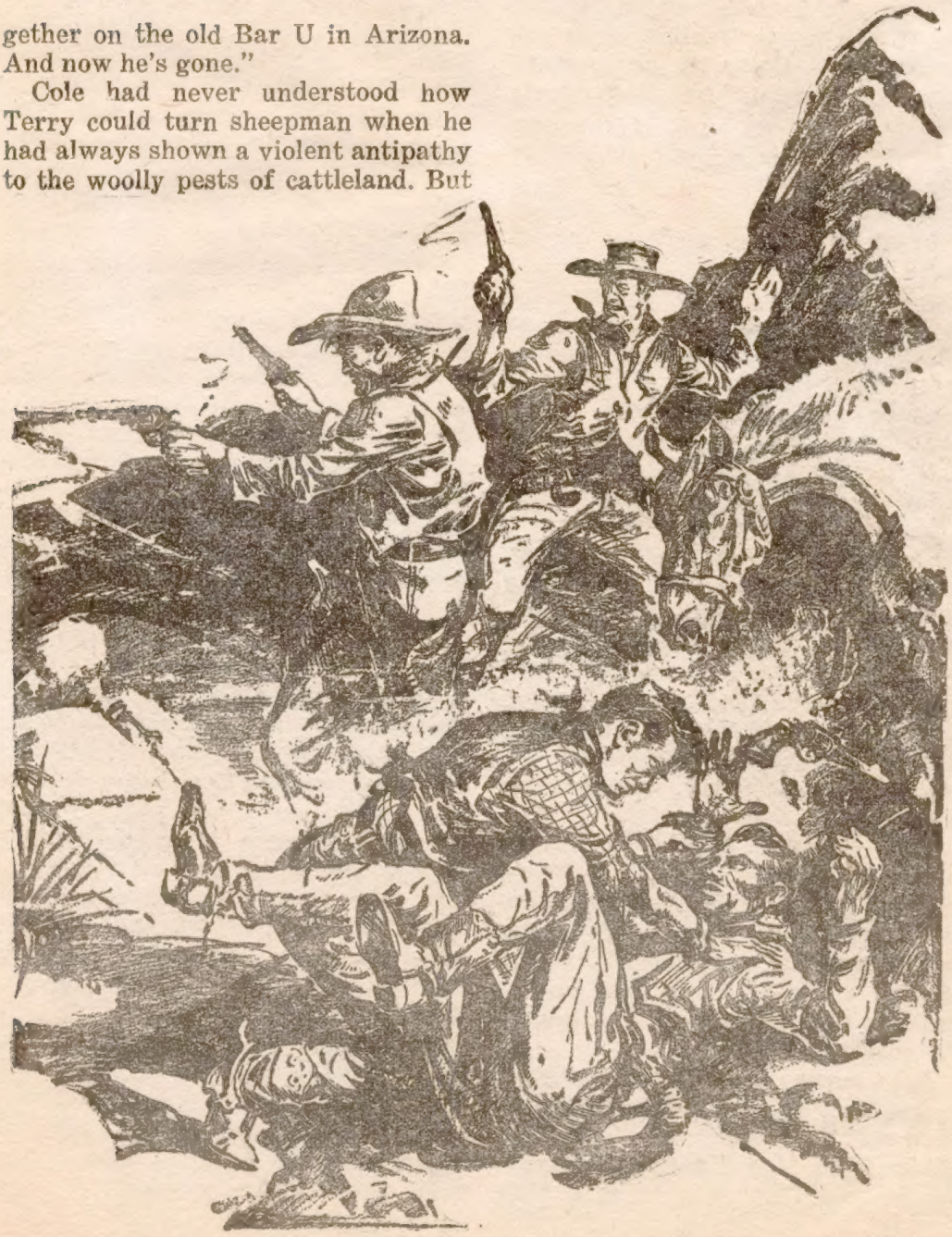
a Crimson Legacy

Rangeland Novelette

By J. Edward Leithead

gether on the old Bar U in Arizona. And now he's gone."

Cole had never understood how Terry could turn sheepman when he had always shown a violent antipathy to the woolly pests of cattleland. But



apparently Magill had prospered during the three years that had passed since he and Cole gripped hands for the last time, Magill striking north for Colorado, Cheyney riding east to New Mexico. Cole adhering to the rule of "once a cowman, always a cowman," had become wagon boss for an Apache County spread.

In earlier days the stamping ground of renegade Indians and whites, the county still ran a bit too much to lawlessness, and Cole's six-gun expertness led to his appointment as deputy sheriff.

He had signally aided in putting law and order on a sound basis. A newspaper account of his exploits had come to the notice of Terry Magill, and a letter to Cole had followed. It was the first that Cheyney knew his one-time saddlemate was located on the Smoky River, Colorado, running sheep on a large scale. There were two other sheep outfits nearby, Magill had written, and though the cattlemen of the region had no use for anybody in that business, the combination was too strong for them to be run out.

Cheyney had answered that letter, ribbing his friend a little for giving up cows to herd sheep, but expressing pleasure to know Magill was doing well. The next Cole heard from Terry was a year later. Things weren't going so swimmingly in the sheep business. A bunch of outlaws had come into the Smoky River country, were riding high.

The cattlemen, hating the sheepmen, supported the long-riders. Magill asked Cheyney, if he wasn't working at his lawman's job, to head for Smoky with his guns oiled. Promised him all kinds of money and an interest in the sheep ranch, to help oust the outlaws.

But Cheyney hadn't been interested in waging war for sheep, and besides, liked sheriffing where he was. Other letters from Magill arrived, requesting his aid. Cole thought it a little strange the authorities weren't able to rid Smoky range of the wild bunch that Magill complained were threatening to wipe out the sheep industry.

A MONTH later Apache County held an election at which the party Cheyney was affiliated with lost. Another sheriff climbed into the saddle, new deputies were appointed. Cole Cheyney went back to cowpunching. That had been six weeks ago, and just this morning he had stopped at the county-seat post office to find the letter from Smoky River, addressed in an unfamiliar hand.

It was from Burton Harmer, attorney at law, informing Cheyney of Magill's death following a gunfight with one Jimmy Deshong, and that, before he died, Magill had put signature to paper leaving his sheep holdings to Cole Cheyney. The latter was to report in person, as soon as possible, to claim the legacy.

"Good of old Terry," thought Cole, folding the letter and tucking it in his shirt pocket. "I dunno as I can stand for the woolly bleaters, but I sure aim to see that this Deshong killer gets his needin's if the law hasn't wound up his ball o' yarn. Maybe I should've dropped everything and gone to help Terry when he first asked me."

There was nothing to hold him in New Mexico now, at any rate.

The day that Cole ambled up a tributary of Smoky River, Colorado, with the Smoky River Mountains rising a thousand feet into cloudless blue on the north, a light wagon and several horsemen halted beneath a tree at the upper bend of the creek. The rider from the south was only a half mile away, but the outfit so far hadn't observed him. They were intent on grim business, as Cheyney could see at a glance.

Beside the driver, there was a man in the wagon with roped hands and feet. Three riders stepped from saddles into the wagon-box, one of them carrying a lariat. The bound man was held firmly upright by two of the lynchers, while the third fitted him with a hemp cravat. The free end

of the rope was flung across a stout overhead limb and the trio jumped to the ground, to throw their combined weight on the lariat.

The teamster lifted his lines, opened his mouth to yell at the horses and drive out from under the gaunt figure standing on tiptoe. But he shut his lips soundlessly, jerked head sideways at the sudden roar of a six-gun.

Riding his spurs, Cole Cheyney had fired to attract attention. The team was held to a rigid stand while the driver stared, and the hang-rope went slack as the men gripping it faced south. Those of the group who were still ahorse eyed the stranger with the smoking Colt and their hands stole hipward. Cheyney wrenched his mount to a dusty stop, slapped his left side and presented twin smokers as an argument against hasty action on the lynchers' part.

"Kinda illegal hangin' a man thisaway, ain't it?" the cowboy drawled, looking in vain for any badge of authority on frayed vests or faded shirts. "With no sheriff officiatin', appears to be like Judge Lynch is holdin' court, and ol' Judge never did, never will hand down any decision worth a picayune!"

A fox-faced horseman growled, "Well, you see, cowpoke, our sheriff had other pressin' business today and we're takin' this gallows job off his hands. You figure Colonel Colt is a higher court—"

"High enough to stop a lynchin'!" broke in Cheyney, frosty-eyed. "What's the fellow done?"

THE prisoner answered that in a shaking voice, "Nothing at all, stranger, except oppose these men in their outlawry. They're some of Jimmy Deshong's gang. I'm Lawyer Burton Harmer, of Lodgepole."

Cole's surprise caused him to look straight at the neck-roped man for the first time.

"Why, I've got a letter from you in my pocket, Mr. Harmer! I'm Cole Cheyney, from Apache County, New Mex—"

"Look out!" screeched Harmer.

Cole ducked as a gun banged. The fox-faced rider was glaring at him through the smoke, others of the lynching party were stabbing for killingware. The cowboy, hunched low in his saddle, thumbed hammers. Foxface rocked with the impact of slugs tunneling him, parted from his horse in a sidewise roll as the animal reared.

The trio holding the rope attached to Burton Harmer had backed off to pull six-shooters. Cheyney, spraying them with lead, kicked his horse toward the wagon. The team showed signs of bolting, and it behooved Cole to get away from there fast with the lawyer or they'd both be in shape for wooden coats.

Harmer had dropped to his knees in the wagon-bed as the rope's tautness relaxed; he couldn't lie flat because the lariat suddenly snagged in a forked branch. Cheyney cleared his saddle and the wagon's sideboard with lead buzzing close. He grasped the hemp line above Harmer's head, yanked it loose, and the lawyer fell on his face.

"Drive!" Cole snapped at the teamster, who had half turned on his seat. "East, across the creek!"

He hunkered down with his back against a sideboard, pouched left-hand Colt above the teamster's sagging cartridge belt and held the other weapon tilted to repel attackers. The wagon jolted off, as two horsemen spurred up on the near side. From cramped position, Cole triggered, and one outlaw slapped hand to ear. A bullet from the second rider's .45 clipped Cheyney's hatbrim. His return shot struck the fellow's shoulder and there was a glint of steel spinning through the air. The wagon rumbled creekward with the team at a stretching run.

Cole judged the stream was fordable at almost any point, since what he had seen of it, heading up the west bank, had been no more than hub-high

to a wagon wheel. He had further noticed a series of rocky uplifts on the east side, where a man might stand a fighting chance against smokeroo odds. The wagon's tailboard was chained up and he could no longer see the Deshong gang, but he heard them coming. He glanced at Burton Harmer, who had rolled on his side and was regarding him fixedly. The lawyer had a long, bony face, with slightly receding chin, deep-set eyes overhung by bushy brows.

"Noose chokin' you, Mr. Harmer?" asked Cole.

"A little," replied the lawyer. "I can put up with it until we're out of this. What're our chances, in your opinion?"

"You know the gang better than I do," said Cheyney. "We'll make the best fight we can from the rocks 'cross the creek. Funny I should meet you this way—"

THE wagon nosed down the sloping creek bank and a furious churning of water ensued as the team plunged for the far side. Cole heard the wheels grate on stony bottom. The driver evidently believed it a favorable moment to quit the outfit, for the jolting had dislodged the cowboy's gun from its rib-tickling position. He dived off the wagon-box, submerged with a loud splash.

Cheyney rose, bracing himself against the sideboard. The reins had been flung into the water as the driver jumped, but the horses were moving steadily shoreward without guidance and Cole shifted his attention to the man scrambling for the west bank. The fellow emerged, dripping, but made no play for the gun on his hip. Instead, he started at a lope to meet the horsebackers pounding toward the creek. They were not yet in shooting range. Cole replaced spent cartridges with some from his crossed belts.

The wagon team hit the east bank, hauled out a hundred yards from the flint hills. Cole slid over the driver's seat, swung to the ground and grabbed the trailing reins. He halted the horses in rocky shelter, removed the hangnoose from Harmer's neck, cut his lashings with a stock knife. While the lawyer was working the kinks out of his arms and legs, Cheyney, standing beside him in the wagon, viewed the situation on the west bank. The Deshong gang hadn't crossed over, but were sitting saddles, talking.

"Looks like they're not comin' for another smokefest," remarked the cowboy. "Measurin' their chances, with two of us throwin' lead from behind this hill, I reckon they find 'em not so good."

Burton Harmer stopped chafing his wrists to study the group. "They're leaderless, too, Cheyney. Jimmy Deshong's not along, and you shot his lieutenant, that fox-faced fellow. Larry Birkett was his name. Has a brother, Gil. You got a couple besides Larry and that's all to the good. They're turning back!"

The outlaws wheeled, put their horses to a trot northward up the far bank, the teamster riding behind one of his mates.

"I see my bronc lookin' for me," said Cole. "How come you to get roped up by that gang, Mr. Harmer? I know they've been causin' trouble, of course, from what Terry wrote me before this Deshong downed him."

"Lucky for me you happened along, Cheyney," declared the lawyer. "I won't forget it. Terry Magill always said you were the quickest man with shooting-irons he ever knew. He wanted your help badly—we all did. I represent the sheep interests in this Smoky River fight."

Cole said, "A lawyer wantin' a Colt-man to settle a range ruckus is a new one on me—not that I'm a professional gun-thrower, you understand. What's the matter with the sheriff and the courts?"

"Both on our side, of course," replied Harmer. "But the outlaw faction is strong because the sheep-hating cowmen back it up. Today's the first

time they've laid violent hands on me, though I've been threatened often enough. I was riding home from Pete McSwingle's sheep ranch when I met the Deshong bunch. Don't know where they were going with the wagon, but they pitched me into it, tied up, and turned south along the creek. Larry Birkett told me to take my last look at the scenery as they intended swinging me from the first tree they came to. Starting to kill us off one by one, you see. First Terry, me next, then McSwingle and Hyatt. Now that you're here to hold the Magill ranch against them, Cheyney, we'll turn the tables on those desperadoes!"

CHAPTER II

Shotgun Girl

CHEYNEY and the lawyer drove into Lodgepole without encountering the Deshong riders. On the way Harmer related that Terry Magill had gone gunning for Jimmy Deshong after the outlaws had twice stampeded his sheep over a cliff, killing upward of a thousand head. The gang had raided McSwingle's and Hyatt's outfits, but the loss in sheep hadn't been so great. Magill and Deshong, meeting in Lodgepole, had shot it out, but Terry had no chance from the start, according to Harmer.

"Terry died in the sheriff's office," stated the lawyer, "right after bequeathing his sheep holdings to you, Cheyney. He said you'd be sure to come north to claim the property and he could count on your evening the score with his killer."

"I will," said Cole solemnly. "I reckon Deshong defied arrest?"

"Sheriff Joe Keenan arrested him, all right," replied Harmer, "and he stood trial. But there were so many cowmen on the jury, Jimmy was acquitted. They're backing his gang to put the sheepmen out of business. Deshong further curries favor by his free spending when the cattlemen are in town."

"Where's he get the money and what's his game?" asked the cowboy.

"Been several stage holdups since he came to Smoky River," said Harmer. "Though we're pretty sure his gang did it, we haven't been able to trace it back to them. As to Jimmy Deshong's game—well, he poses as the cattlemen's gun advocate, but he's really nothing more than a dirty little killer running wild."

Lodgepole proved to be very much like the cowburg in Apache County where Cole had hung up his spurs, except that there were fewer adobes and more log and frame buildings. They left the wagon team and Cheyney's saddler at a livery stable, went on foot to Harmer's office in the block above. As lawyer and cowboy approached, a bald-headed oldster in levis and badly worn boots arose from the office doorstep.

"Howdy, lawyer," he greeted. "Been waitin' here two hours for you to come back."

"Yes?" said Harmer. "You have the mortgage money, I suppose—three thousand dollars?"

"I did have it when I left the ranch," answered the man. "My wife and me, we pinched and saved every way we could, to get that money lumped. As I was passin' that point of rocks a mile from my south pasture, two masked fellers jumped me. Wasn't no use fightin'—they'd 'a' killed me and got the money anyway. Havin' cleaned me, they disappeared back among the rocks, where their hosses was."

BURTON HARMER stroked his weak chin, with a light in his eyes that Cole Cheyney didn't like. The lawyer spoke abruptly. "I had a run-in myself with some of the Deshong gang, but Jimmy and several others weren't there. Likely a couple of the absent ones stuck you up, Spale. Could you identify them?"

"Nary," retorted Spale, "but they looked to me like a brace of McSwingle's or Hyatt's gun-toters."

"Impossible!" snapped Harmer. "If you could swear in court that they were Deshong men, I might help you, Spale. But—"

"You know it wasn't none of Jimmy's outfit!" Spale cut in, his voice rising. "Just want to git somethin' on 'em because they're the friends of us cowmen and fightin' the sheep kings!"

Harmer's mouth tightened. "All right, Spale, if that's the way you look at it. You haven't the money, so I'll have to foreclose. I'll give you three days to move off the Tin Cup!"

"The law allows more time'n that!" exclaimed Spale, his gaze furious. "I know there's hardly any chance I'll recover that three thousand, but you're rushin' things so's McSwingle or Hyatt can run more dang sheep where my cows are rangin' now! It's happened that way before. You take our land one day, sell it to the sheepmen the next—"

"I've the right to sell to whoever I please," broke in Harmer stridently. "I don't ask you cowmen to borrow my money. You come to me because the Lodgepole Bank won't make a loan on the security you have to offer. Be ready to give me possession in three days, Spale!"

"I'll ask Judge Patchel if I have to get off that soon!" bellowed the Tin Cup rancher.

"That old soak's knowledge of the law is decidedly hazy at times," retorted Harmer. "Don't forget I'm a lawyer."

"You're a shyster and worse!" hollered Spale, beginning to move off. "I wouldn't put it above you to set them robbers onto me, since I told you I was goin' to pay on time!"

Burton Harmer looked as if he would have drawn a gun on the spot, if the holster covered by his frock coat hadn't been empty. Spale backed away, watching him, unaware of the lawyer's gunless state. Harmer turned abruptly to the office door and unlocked it.

"There's gratitude for you, Cheyney!" he snarled, throwing the door wide and motioning the cowpuncher ahead of him. "These two-bit cowmen want money to tide them over dry spells, to buy more cattle, make necessary repairs and so on. When they can't pay up and lose their property, they call me names or go for a gun."

"Spale didn't try for his," Cole said seriously. "I felt sorry for the old fellow. It's mighty tough to lose all you've got at his age. So you're a moneylender as well as a lawyer?"

"On the side, Cheyney," answered Harmer. "Just in a small way. Don't waste any sympathy on such men as Link Spale. Sit by my desk here and we'll go over that will."

Afterward Harmer said he had other important papers requiring attention but in half an hour would be ready to ride to the Magill sheep ranch with Cheyney. Meantime, Cole could go and look the town over.

AS THE cowboy strolled along the plank sidewalk, he was in anything but a pleasant frame of mind. He hadn't warmed much to Burton Harmer from the first, and after the recent verbal encounter with Link Spale he thought even less of the lawyer. He wondered if there was any basis in fact for Spale's blunt suggestion that he had been robbed to prevent his clearing off the Tin Cup mortgage.

Cole was passing a saloon when the batwing doors budged outward and a tall, white-whiskered man, frock-coated like Burton Harmer, stepped uncertainly onto the stoop. He dropped heel suddenly through a hole where the boards had rotted away, windmilled his arms to regain balance but fell flat before Cole could spring to his side. The cowboy helped him up, remarking:

"Seems like the saloon owner could make it safer for his customers by replacin' them planks."

"Quite right, sir," agreed the other. "I've told him about it more than once, as I am the sort of customer he'd

scarcely want to lose. I need a little stimulant morning and evening, and sometimes in between. Will you join me in a bourbon? Judge Alan Patchel at your service."

"Thanks, judge," replied Cole, "but it ain't my drinkin' time. I'm a newcomer here or I'd prob'ly recognized you. Name's Cole Cheyney. Up from New Mexico to claim the sheep ranch left me by the late Terry Magill. We were saddlemates once in Arizona. Of course you knew Terry?"

Patchel's red-rimmed eyes studied the cowboy. "I knew him. You say you were his friend? Well—have you met Magill's lawyer, Burton Harmer?"

Cole nodded, briefly stating that he had saved Harmer from a hanging by members of the Deshong gang. He and the judge had left the stoop, were pacing slowly up the sidewalk.

"While I do not condone lynch law, Cheyney," said Patchel, "I'm inclined to think this range would have been better off if you had let Harmer swing."

"That's a pretty strong statement, ain't it, judge?" retorted the cowboy. "From what I understand, the sheepmen are at odds with a bunch of long riders. You don't side with the outlaws?"

"By no means," denied Judge Patchel. "But if you live long enough, you will discover this Smoky River war presents a knotty problem."

"How was it," pursued Cheyney, "that Jimmy Deshong, if he has had such a bad rep, was allowed to go free after killin' Terry?"

"You want the truth, even if it hurts?" asked Judge Patchel.

"Yes," said Cole wonderingly.

"Well, then," resumed Patchel, "I don't hold with killings, but in this instance I found little fault with the jury's verdict. There were eyewitnesses to the effect that your late friend Magill was posted in an alleyway to shoot Deshong as he passed by. But Deshong spied him and fired first."

"It wasn't like Terry to try'n' bushwhack an enemy," asserted Cole.

"How long since you last saw him?" inquired Judge Patchel.

"About three years."

"Men change in a much shorter time, especially when engaged in herding dollars. Cheyney, you look like an honest young man—I hope you are. Of late I've come to distrust everyone in the Smoky River range but Judge Alan Patchel, and," he chuckled, "sometimes I don't even trust myself. Here we are at my home, sir, and I'd be pleased to have you—Who's that on the porch?" he broke off, peering.

Cole eyed the disconsolate figure in a porch rocker.

"Man named Spale, I believe. He wants to see you. I'll drop by another time, judge."

PATCHEL weaved gently toward the steps and Link Spale came to meet him, throwing a hard look at Cheyney as the latter turned away. His mood, as he clacked along, had scarcely improved. Despite the fact that the judge had been drinking, it had impressed Cole that he was speaking the truth.

Cheyney disliked to think Terry Magill had descended to bushwhack tactics, no matter how much Deshong deserved rubbing out. And Judge Patchel had hinted Magill wasn't careful how he made money, denounced Burton Harmer as a fit subject for a hemp cravat.

When he and the lawyer were riding north from Lodgepole, Cheyney casually remarked that he had met the judge in his roving about town.

"Jiggered, wasn't he?" said Harmer, who, mounted on a livery stable nag, didn't cut much of a figure as a saddleman.

The cowboy nodded. "Slightly."

Harmer glanced at him keenly. "Say anything about me or the sheepmen? If he did, just take it with a grain of salt. Patchel's hardly ever sober."

Cheyney repeated what the judge had said about Magill.

"Those eyewitnesses," declared the lawyer, "were cattlemen who favored Deshong and perjured themselves. Terry stepped out of the alley to face that bandit. He was straight as a string in everything. You ought to know."

Sometime later they struck a line fence, followed it west to a gate. Riding north again for the Magill sheep ranch, Cole noticed how acres of rangeland had been so closely grazed and cut by the small, sharp feet of thousands of sheep that the grass would probably never grow again in any quantity. That was one trouble with raising woollies. They spoiled the grazing, had to be driven constantly to new pastures.

Cole looked over the undulating plain, expecting to catch sight of flocks somewhere in the vast sweep of land, for Lawyer Harmer had told him that Magill had owned five or six thousand head when Jimmy Deshong smoked him down.

"Where's the woollies?" he asked, at length.

"What I'm wondering myself," frowned Harmer. "Should be able to see them from here. The ranch is over the next rise. Outfit was left in charge of Magill's foreman, Dugdale. There's the home ranch." The lawyer pointed below as they topped the rise.

It looked like headquarters of a cow outfit to Cheyney, with a long, low main building, small blacksmith shop, wagon-shed, barns and corrals. He made no comment as they dropped down the slope. Harmer shaded his eyes, evidently the better to see two horses standing on bridle reins by the ranch house.

"Thought I recognized those broncs," he said. "You'll have a chance to meet Pete McSwingle and Tony Hyatt, your sheepmen neighbors. Visiting Dugdale, I guess."

Cheyney and the lawyer left saddles and went up the wide steps. As their boots scraped on the porch, the front door opened and a girl in a man's flannel shirt and corduroy skirt stepped out, cuddling a shotgun. The twin muzzles focused on the men, while the young woman's fingers rested on the triggers.

"Leave my ranch, Lawyer Harmer," she ordered tensely, "you and your two-gun friend—or I'll let each of you have a barrel!"

"Lenora Quillen!" exclaimed Harmer, his eyes protruding at her. "Where'd you drop from?"

CHAPTER III

Bloodstained Legacy

COLE CHEYNEY had never seen a girl more in the mood to do violence, nor a prettier one. Lenora Quillen was tall, slender and healthfully tanned. She handled the shotgun like one accustomed to firearms.

"Long time since you laid eyes on me, isn't it Harmer?" she said. "No doubt you thought I'd gone, never to return. Well, I've been living only thirty miles from here, back in the hills, with a homesteader's family. And keeping track of events on Smoky range as well as I could. Now I'm back on the Long Rail, dad's old ranch, to stay, and that rascally Magill's sheep are gone! There'll be cattle on this range, as formerly, when I can raise the cash to buy them."

Burton Harmer, with a wary eye on the scattergun, spoke softly, "Miss Quillen, I think we could talk just as well if you'd lay that weapon aside. We're not going to harm you—"

"Harm me!" the girl cut in with a harsh laugh. "You and your sheep partners have done dad and me all the harm you're ever going to! The shoe's on the other foot now, with Jimmy Deshong riding the range!"

"That gun-notching outlaw—" began Harmer.

"Introduce me to the lady, Harmer," said Cheyney bruskly. "There's a lot here will stand explainin'."

"Miss Quillen," the lawyer said,

"let me make you acquainted with Cole Cheyney, from New Mexico. Old pal of Terry Magill's. Terry left him the sheep ranch and he's come to take possession. So you see—"

A hoarse bellow broke loose at the rear of the house.

"Harmer, have you treed that wildcat? We're in a fix!"

"McSwingle!" burst from the lawyer's lips. "I was forgetting him and Hyatt." He took an involuntary step forward. "What've you done to 'em?"

Cheyney had dropped his gaze to watch the girl's fingers caress the shotgun triggers. He covered the interval between them with a sudden agile bound, flinging out his left hand. One barrel let go with a roar as he struck the weapon up. Nine buckshot that would have riddled Harmer in another split second, tore into the porch roof. Cole wrested the gun from Lenora's clinging grip.

"You don't want a killin' standin' against you, Miss Quillen," he said as, stormy-eyed and panting, she leaned against the house wall.

"There never was a man deserved it more than Burton Harmer!" Lenora retorted fiercely.

ANGRILY the lawyer barked, "The girl's dangerous, Cheyney! She ought to be tied up. I'll get your rope and take care of her."

"Never mind the rope!" snapped Cole. "I want to know why she thinks this ranch belongs to her."

"I'll tell you, quick enough," shouted Harmer. "It was her old man's till he was convicted of cow stealing and hung—"

"Framed, you mean!" broke in the girl. "And you, Harmer, were as responsible as anyone for Pat Quillen's death. Your sheep-raising friends wanted more range, yet couldn't buy any from the cattlemen. The Long Rail was biggest and best, so evidence of rustling was trumped up—"

"It was a clear case against Pat," snarled the lawyer, "and the sheriff did his duty on the spot!"

"Joe Keenan's one of your gang," Lenora accused bitterly, "so there wasn't even a trial. The Long Rail was disbanded and the forfeited property sold to Terry Magill—for a song, no doubt. Since then, by one means or another, you've grabbed other ranch lands and sold or leased them to McSwingle and Hyatt. The cowmen have lived to regret they didn't stick together and oppose the flockmasters from the beginning."

"If you're going to stand here and listen to this stuff, Cheyney," fumed Harmer, "I've something better to do. Those fellows inside—"

"Can wait," Cole turned compelling eyes on him. "I'm rememberin' that fellow Spale, in town. I don't like the looks of things, not any."

"You're not siding with him and this girl?" exclaimed the lawyer, in angry amazement. "It's to your own interest— Say, Miss Quillen, has that Deshong anything to do with your being here?"

She nodded quickly, a little proudly. "Everything! You never knew why Jimmy and his riders took up the cause of the little cowmen before the last one was sheeped out, did you? A long time ago they stopped at the homesteader's, being out of grub. They were looking for land to start a cow ranch. I'd never seen them before, but when I told Jimmy about conditions over here on Smoky, he said. 'Looks like there's work for us to do, boys.' And they all agreed. You call them outlaws, Harmer, but they're crusaders, 'specially Jimmy!"

Cole studied the girl as she talked. Evidently Lenora believed what she was saying. He could understand how, in her embittered state of mind, she would be apt to romanticize anyone who appeared in the role of defender without knowing his past history or questioning his motive.

"When did you come here, Miss Quillen?" asked Cole.

"Two days ago," said Lenora, adding defiantly, "and I'm staying! Jimmy will see to that!"

"Where is he, by the way?"

"This morning he and some of his men started driving Magill's sheep to Smoky River. I didn't want him to get rid of them that way, but Jimmy said he wasn't going to let McSwingle or Hyatt have them and he had no time to look up an outside buyer."

"Your sheep, Cheyney!" yelped Harmer. "The bluffs along Smoky are high and the river's swift. But sheep travel slow. Might be a chance of overtaking the gang if we had enough men. What happened to Dugdale and the herders, you wildcat?" he glared at Lenora.

"Deshong chased them and the dogs into the foothills," she answered. "Your friends McSwingle and Hyatt learned that the flocks were being moved and rode over a while ago to find out what it meant. They're now my prisoners."

Cole Cheyney said, "Let's go in and take a look at 'em."

CHEYNEY dropped the shotgun in the bend of his arm and Lenora turned through the doorway, Cole following with the lawyer at his heels. The girl led the way to the kitchen, where two men were securely lashed to chairs. One was lean, with drooping yellow mustache, the other stockily built, black-bearded, and both were scowling darkly.

Cole suppressed a grin. "Which is which? How come you fellows let a girl put it over you this way?"

"Who're you?" growled the thin fellow.

"That's Pete McSwingle," Harmer said to Cheyney. "The chunky man is Tony Hyatt. Boys, the stranger is Magill's pal from New Mexico."

The scowls of the sheepmen fled.

"Glad you've come, Cheyney," declared McSwingle. "Never expectin' to find Nora Quillen here, she took us by surprise. And a shotgun's a good persuader. She forced Tony to tie me up, then roped Tony herself. Said she'd keep us here till Deshong got back—which would've meant killin' us both in cold blood!"

Cole's eyes shifted to Lenora. "Would you have stood for that?"

She shook her head quickly. "No. Jimmy isn't that kind—he fights square. You're not going to release those scoundrels!" Lenora spoke with a rising inflection, her cheeks beginning to burn. "They're usually surrounded by gunmen, and the chance to capture them might never come again."

"If I was you, Miss Quillen, I'd let 'em go," said the cowboy persuasively. "Then, whatever happens, you won't have it on your conscience. Go ahead, Harmer, turn 'em loose."

"Naturally, I was going to!" The lawyer strode to McSwingle's side, drawing a pocket-knife.

Lenora gazed tight-lipped at Cole, at the captured shotgun. She uttered no word, but he knew that he stood about deuce-high with her at the moment. Pete McSwingle stood up, with pieces of lariat strewn around his feet, and kicked the kitchen chair into a corner. Harmer was severing the rope on Hyatt.

"We'll take Nora Quillen off your hands, now, Cheyney," said McSwingle. "The place for her is the Lodgepole jail. She's eggin' on this Deshong gang."

Cole's eyes narrowed. "You're not jailin' her, McSwingle! If she wants to stay here, she can. Seems to have a better right than anyone."

"Don't be a fool, Cheyney!" McSwingle reddened angrily. "Terry left the ranch to you—he paid cash money for it. And we're countin' on you to help run the long-riders out!"

"From the story Miss Quillen tells, I'm not sure I want to help." Cole let the shotgun sag forward. "I'll think it over. Gather your hardware. Your horses are waitin' outside."

McSwingle snorted and turned abruptly to Burton Harmer. "What about this, Burt? Cheyney appears to be gettin' off on the wrong foot. You

sure he's the right claimant to Magill's holdin's?"

"Proved that, all right," replied the lawyer, "but I don't know what's come over him."

"Lettin' Nora hoodwink him," asserted Tony Hyatt, now free of his bonds.

FLOCKMASTERS and lawyer looked at the shotgun, at Cole's gun-laden hips, and evidently weren't keen to gamble with so much artillery in capable hands. Pete gave a short, ugly laugh.

"Cheyney," he said, "don't line up on the wrong side. You'll learn it won't pay no dividends if you do. That's not a threat—just good advice. Ride over and see us when you come to your senses."

Cole's smile was grim. "I haven't decided what I'll do yet."

Securing their Colts, the sheepmen started for the front of the house, Harmer trailing them, and Cheyney bringing up the rear. Lenora remained where she was, standing stiffly against the kitchen wall.

McSwingle and Hyatt mounted in sullen silence, but Burton Harmer, as he swung up, called to the cowboy, watching from the porch:

"Be sensible, Cole, and throw in with us like Terry meant you to. Most any man would be glad to have your opportunity."

Cheyney didn't reply, and dust lifted as the three horses were put into rapid motion. When the puncher turned, Lenora stood in the doorway.

"I hardly know what to say—" her voice was low—"but I suppose I ought to thank you, even though you let the prisoners go."

"Not necessary," he replied. "If Terry Magill got this ranch under the circumstances you've named, I have no right to any part of it. Terry sure fell into bad company and hit the downgrade. It's tough to learn that about an old pal. You're only confirmin' what Judge Patchel hinted to me before I came here. Though he had been drinkin', I couldn't help believin' him somehow."

"The judge is honest, if he does tipple," declared the girl. "He can tell you how my father was framed. Perhaps you haven't a very high opinion of me, fighting to regain the ranch and bring dad's murderers to justice—like a wildcat, as McSwingle says.

"But how would you feel to see the one you loved most dangling from a wagon-tongue, hung for a crime he never committed, so that sheepmen could take over his land? I had to cut him down myself—nobody would help me!" Her head dropped, the last words were barely audible. "I'm glad mother didn't live to see it."

Cole felt a lump rise in his throat. "It was enough to turn your brain, Miss Quillen. There's a job to be done here on Smoky River, but hardly the one I expected."

She looked at him with tear-wet, eager eyes. "You'll ride with Jimmy Deshong and the cowmen, then, to break the rule of the sheep kings?"

"I'll have to meet Deshong first," said Cheyney. "I hope he ain't foolin' you, Miss Quillen. Can't say I liked what I've seen of his men. Had to drill three of them early today and I don't know how Jimmy'll feel about it. What's the shortest way to the river point where Deshong was headin' them sheep?"

"You'll strike their trail two miles west of here," replied Lenora. "Then turn north—but wait, I have a pony in the corral. I'll go with you."

"Rather go alone," said Cole. "You think there'll be shootin'? Not unless Deshong begins it. The sheep don't belong to him, he has no right to kill them."

CHEYNEY leaned the shotgun against the door frame and clanked down the steps to his horse. Lenora moved to the porch railing.

"I wish you'd let me ride along," she said in a troubled voice.

Cole smiled at her faintly from the saddle. "I understand, Miss Quillen,

that you think pretty well of this Jimmy fellow. But the odds will be on his side. I'm the one likely to come back feet first if there's any gun-work."

"I don't want that to happen, either," she told him, so earnestly that Cheyney rode away with a lighter heart.

He'd come to Smoky River to claim an inheritance, only to learn of a pal's retrogression, and that the legacy was bloodstained. He had no right to the ranch, since it had not been honestly acquired by Magill in the first place. Perhaps he wrongly interpreted the last act of Terry's life, but it looked now as though the dying man's chief purpose had been to draw Cole into the sheep and cattle war as an instrument of vengeance, trusting that Cheyney wouldn't discover he was lending his guns to an infamous enterprise.

The trail of the sheep, slow travelers because of their short legs, covered a wide area and Cole rode hard, once he struck it west of the ranch. He passed some animals that had been shot by the ruthless drovers, probably because they couldn't keep up with the flock. Cheyney, though he had no fondness for sheep, frowned at this needless slaughter.

Lashing through folds in the plain, jumping gullies, with the high ramparts of the Smoky River Mountains beckoning in the north, he at last caught the gleam of the distant river from a ridge crest. He was encouraged to observe a wide band of gray between him and that shining water, but moving steadily toward it. And he spied outriding horsemen, too far off for him to count them accurately.

The cowboy allowed his horse a short breathing spell, then plied the spurs for the final dash. A growth of scrub oak stood in mid-plain and Cheyney reined toward it to mask his approach. Thick dust canopied the flock, he could hear its monotonous bleating and the flat-sounding voices of the drovers. Cole slowed his pace sixty yards from the timber patch as someone yelled on the other side of it:

"Drop back from the flanks, you fellows, and get set to burn powder! I'll be with you soon's I fix this cinch."

It was a youthful voice, sharp and piercing, and Cole thought instantly of Jimmy Deshong. The fellow tightening a loose cinch might not be the gang's young leader, but, on sudden impulse, Cheyney hit the ground and ran forward, taking advantage of cover that wouldn't have concealed his horse. He reached the far edge of the small wood unnoticed. A slim figure in grey Stetson, spotted calfhide vest and white angora chaps was just rising to an ornate stock saddle on a line-back buckskin, with black mane and tail. Cole stepped out with a six-shooter lined from the hip:

"If you're Jimmy Deshong, or whoever you are, order them fellows not to stampede my sheep! I'm Cole Cheyney, friend of Terry Magill's!"

CHAPTER IV

Gaudy Gunhawk

THE rider eased down in the saddle, facing Cheyney with slitted eyes. He was in his early twenties, boldly good-looking. The cedar butts of .45's in armpit holsters jutted from either side of his open vest, and his hands started upward, perhaps in token of surrender, though Cole wasn't risking it.

"Lock 'em on the saddle horn, kid!" warned the cowpuncher. "Your smoke-irons are arranged too handy for a cross-arm draw."

"You're the second man ever to get the drop on Jimmy Deshong," said the other, folding his hands on the pommel, "and the first man's dead. Cheyney, from Apache County, eh? Heard tell of you. I reckon you want to square up for Magill?"

"Talk about that later," replied Cheyney. "Call your men away from them sheep! The woollies won't run

after the long drive unless they're prodded."

"You're tellin' me!" exclaimed Deshong. "Never had so much trouble movin' a bunch of critters." He faced away from Cole and his shrill voice carried far: "Hey, boys, hold everything! Don't stampede 'em yet!"

Voices answered him in surprised questioning. The thud of hoofs cut through the everlasting bleat, bleat of the widespread flock. Deshong turned to the cowboy with glinting eyes.

"If you figure you've a grudge to settle, Cheyney, let's have it over with before my men get here. I don't need their help in this. Minute I hit the ground you can start foggin'!"

"Nothin' wrong with your nerve, Deshong," conceded the puncher. "But sit quiet. Though Terry Magill and I were pals once, I've heard things to convince me that shootin' was square enough on your part."

Jimmy Deshong's eyes widened. "Well, it was! Magill bushed up in a Lodgepole alley to pump me full o' lead, but it worked the other way. Who told you?"

"I've talked with Judge Patchel and Miss Quillen," answered Cheyney.

Deshong stiffened, his gaze once more narrowed. "Nora Quillen! Sure! She must've told you about the sheep drive. You're throwin' in with them other mutton growers, I reckon, aim to dispossess that girl. Cheyney, we'd just as well smoke it out now!"

Cole said, "Not for that reason, at any rate. Miss Quillen appears to have first claim to the ranch."

The grimness faded from Jimmy's bronzed face and a smile tugged the corners of his thin-lipped mouth. "If you mean what you say—" he began.

Hoofbeats and a harsh voice speaking close at hand, interrupted him. "What's wrong, Jimmy? Who're you palaverin' with?"

COLE shifted eyes from the gaudy Deshong to three newcomers on horseback. He experienced a slight shock when he recognized them as members of the lynching party. Deshong hadn't referred to the episode, resulting in the death of three of his gang, and Cole had assumed he didn't know about it. The faces of the trio blazed in sudden wrath.

"Why, that there's Cole Cheyney, Jimmy!" exploded the man with the grating voice. "Didn't you know it?"

Deshong nodded. "Introduced himself over his gunsight. But he talks fairer than I expected. Don't crowd him, Gil!"

Gil Birkett's jaw fell while he stared with bulging eyes at the leader. "You forgettin' he plugged three of our bunch this mornin', Larry among 'em?"

"Seein' that you lathered up your horses to fetch me the news, reckon I ain't forgot," retorted the showy one, coolly. "Cheyney and me hadn't got around to discussin' that. But in warfare a man takes his chances. There was enough of you to blot out Cheyney and not get nicked, yet the odds didn't mean anything to him. I like a shootin' fool, even though he's against me—and I ain't sure Cheyney's sheep-loco."

"Well, if you didn't think no more of Larry than that," roared Gil Birkett, "I did! He was my brother!" With the last word he cleared the saddle on the side farthest from Cole. The latter was in pointblank range of the gun Birkett had clawed out and dropped smoking across the deep leather seat.

The cowboy struck the ground on his knees, a hole through the crown of his hat. He started to fold as Birkett swung right leg to dismount, catching the movement from the corner of his eye. Before he could toss a snap-shot with the gun covering Deshong, Gil Birkett was out of the saddle. With swift violence, Jimmy reined his buckskin clear of the firing zone.

Cole's six-shooter clamored, aimed low. Birkett's legs were a better mark than his head just then. He sagged as Cheyney's bullet shattered bone and his free hand clutched the saddle horn.

Birkett's second shot buzzed high, and he hopped along on one leg, his horse dragging him.

"Help me down, you guys!" yelled Birkett in a frenzy.

Cole Cheyney was afflicted with spine-chilling uncertainty, yet dared not remove his eyes from Larry Birkett's brother. Deshong was in the best position to drill the cowboy, but the other pair, facing him diagonally, had almost equal opportunity to end the fight in Birkett's favor.

Sweating through sixty seconds of concentration on the moving target, Cole rapped a sudden shot as Birkett, trying to pull himself back in the saddle and failing, huddled on the ground behind roaring Colt. Birkett keeled over, sighed gustily, and died.

More horsemen were thundering down from the dusk-gray flock and Cheyney shot a look at Jimmy Deshong.

"They won't bother you, Cheyney. Gil had it comin' when he disobeyed orders."

The cowboy broke his gun, reloaded the empty chambers, and shoved the weapon in its scabbard. He thought he could rely on Jimmy's word. The gaudy gunhawk interested him.

AMONG the riders pounding in were two more of the Harmer lynching party, the others were new to Cheyney. They looked at the crumpled form of Gil Birkett, then at the cowboy. Cole thought some of them were pretty cold-eyed, but the leader forestalled hostilities by clipping out:

"All over like a horse race, boys, and Gil was to blame. Proddy on Larry's account. Cheyney's fighter enough to fill dead men's boots if his politics is right. About them sheep, now, Cheyney?"

"I claim 'em," said Cole, "but not with any idea of runnin' a sheep ranch. That's out. But a flock that big is worth somethin' on the hoof. Instead of slaughterin' them they ought to be sold. The proceeds to go toward restockin' the Quillen range with cattle."

Deshong smiled broadly. "I see I didn't make any mistake about you, Cheyney. But I dunno anybody would buy woollies except McSwingle and Hyatt, and we're aimin to stomp out them sheep-ticks!"

"Mind tellin' me why you took cards in the game?" asked Cole.

"Because," said Jimmy, "Nora Quillen needed a hand. I hate sheep and don't like to see big fellows rough ridin' over little fellows."

Cheyney said, "Neither do I. But ain't you kind of oversteppin' the law yourself?"

"Law!" Jimmy repeated scornfully. "Where's any law on this range? Everything's been run to suit the sheepmen. Aided by that coyote lawyer and the sheriff they've been grabbin' land left and right, to stock it with more woollies. Fight fire with fire, don't you?"

"Sometimes," admitted Cole. "I can see this country needs cleanin' up, but if we're goin' to pull together you'll have to keep within the law as much as possible. I was a deputy sheriff in Apache County for a time."

Deshong's eyes turned smoky. "I don't let anyone tell me what to do, Cheyney. We can get along without you." Then, his mood changing, he smiled. "Reckon it's a deal, fellow. We won't burn any more powder than we have to. But you'll find gun law is the only kind that'll work."

Cole strode back through the scrub oak to find his horse. He had little doubt that Deshong and his men were outlaws, but the youthful leader appeared to own a code which had in it some elements of squareness. Obviously, Deshong's interest in Lenora Quillen was his chief incentive in fighting the sheep kings, though hope of personal gain and glory must play a large part.

If he could be held in leash, more good than harm should result from his swashbuckling. His men were just ordinary run-of-the-sage long-riders, of

whom nothing could be expected but that they would fight.

Strange company for Cole Cheyney, ex-lawman and cowhand, to mix with. Yet he judged they were no worse than the ruthless, predatory flockmasters, and the only means at hand of defeating the latter. It was no one man job.

Cheyney mounted and returned to the waiting gunriders. Jimmy Deshong was lighting a cigarette. He tossed the match into the wind, pointed to the restless flock.

"Have to keep 'em grazin' here till we locate a buyer who'll take 'em out of the country. Nora won't mind."

"They ought to be watched," said Cheyney. "If varmints didn't attack them, McSwingle and Hyatt might steal the bunch."

Jimmy nodded. "Coupla my boys will stand guard. Really need dogs, too, but we chased them off with the herders and I reckon they're all runnin' yet."

THE two men he selected for shepherd duty, Tobin and Danvers, profanely objected, considering it beneath them, but Jimmy promised it wouldn't be for long. When Cheyney and the rest of the band bore away southward, the pair left behind were heaping rocks on the blanket-wrapped Gil Birkett, whose final resting place was a shallow gully. En route to Long Rail ranch, Cole told Deshong how he had found Lenora with a couple of prisoners on her hands. Jimmy didn't seem to like it that Cole had allowed McSwingle and Hyatt to go free.

"You saved Harmer's neck, too," the young gunhawk recalled. "We'll get nowhere fast unless you change them tactics, Cole."

Cheyney said firmly, "I won't stand for lynchin' at any time."

Jimmy was silent for the remainder of the trip, but he perked up again in Lenora's presence. During the meal the ranch girl had prepared for the outfit, she and Jimmy carried on an animated conversation. And Cole, watching them, felt a curious pang. He hoped that Jimmy Deshong would prove himself worthy of the girl.

Cheyney wasn't left entirely out in the cold. He had already gained favor by renouncing claim to the ranch, and Lenora was overwhelmed to learn his intention of selling Magill's sheep to purchase cattle for the Long Rail. She declared he was too generous, but Cole shook his head.

"Just tryin' to make some amends for the rough deal you got from my former pal."

The Long Rail bunkhouse served as sleeping quarters for Cheyney and the Deshong riders. Previous to Magill's death, the gang had camped in the foothills. The next morning, Deshong sent one of his men north with a supply of grub for the unwilling shepherds. Cole and Jimmy saddled and headed townward, leaving Deshong's followers to guard the girl against a return visit by the flockmasters.

Cheyney wanted to see Judge Patchel and Burton Harmer, and would have preferred making the trip alone, but Deshong insisted it was safer for two of them to go, in the event that McSwingle and Hyatt were at Lodgepole with some of their gun hirelings.

As the pair trotted along the main street, the old cattleman, Link Spale, rushed from a saloon, past the hitchrack, yelling:

"Hey, Jimmy, you're the man I want to see!"

"Howdy, old Link!" returned Deshong, smiling and checking rein. "What's on your chest?"

Link Spale glanced suspiciously at Cheyney.

"Is that feller to be trusted? He was with Burt Harmer yesterday."

"Cheyney's on our side now," Jimmy reassured him.

Spale, apparently satisfied, aired his woes. Judge Patchel had informed him that he could not lawfully be evicted from the Tin Cup on three days' notice.

"But they'll do it, law or no law, if they can," said Spale, trembling with

anger. "McSwingle or Hyatt will come to my ranch with the sheriff and some gunriders if I ain't gone—and I ain't goin'!"

"Want our help, eh?" Deshong glanced at Cheyney. "We'd as well begin makin' a stand against these range-jumpers, Cole. Of course, the fellers that robbed Spale were a couple of Pete's or Tony's coyote pack."

The cowboy nodded. "I'm with you, if it's straight gunplay."

"Go back to your ranch, Link," said Deshong, "and sit tight. We'll be over with a bunch of fightin' men before time's up."

CHAPTER V

SHEEPMEN'S SHERIFF

BURTON HARMER'S law office was in the next block west, and as Cole and Jimmy made the cross street, they saw the lawyer coming down the sidewalk on the left. He caught sight of them at the same instant, halted abruptly, then whirled and ran, with coat-skirts billowing. Since the attempt to hang him, Harmer evidently believed he would be a target for Deshong's guns on sight. Jimmy's action proved the lawyer wasn't mistaken. He hung in his spurs and slung out a Colt, yelling shrilly:

"Lookit that yellow hound lope to save his hide! If I end him now, won't have to do it later."

A shot barked and splinters flew from the planks behind Harmer. Cole sent his mount after Deshong, crying, "Hold on! Would you shoot a man in the back?"

Jimmy tilted up his smoke-pole and looked around. "Didn't realize what I was doin'. But that buzzard won't stand and fight."

He replaced the spent shell, dropped the gun in leather, while their horses clattered on side by side. The lawyer's pace never slackened until he reached his office. He darted inside, slammed the door. Motioning Deshong to wait in midstreet, Cheyney reined toward the curb, watching for Harmer's appearance at his office window with a shooting-iron. But Cole dismounted and gained the closed door without being fired on. He called:

"Harmer, I've made my decision. Miss Quillen keeps the ranch—"

"And you're lining up with those bandits!" broke in the lawyer's voice, harshly accusing. "It's enough to make Terry turn over in his grave! You'll regret it!"

"Magill wasn't the same man I palled with in Arizona," answered Cole. "I've got to right some of the wrong he did in his money madness. And if I didn't think Deshong's outfit was a heap sight better than some others around here posin' as honest men, I wouldn't take up with them. The sheep gang evidently used every crooked means to get rooted, and they've got to be uprooted!"

He heard Harmer cursing and backed swiftly from the door in anticipation of treacherous triggering. It was well that he moved. Breast-high, a bullet plowed through a panel, wasting itself on thin air. As Cole hit the saddle, Jimmy Deshong kicked his horse nearer.

"Let's go after him!" he snapped.

"Not now," rejoined Cheyney. "He's no Coltman, and it wouldn't help the cause for two fellows like us to rub him out. The whole town's lookin' on."

Jimmy glanced carelessly at the staring groups of men and women up and down the block, then followed Cole without a word. When they stopped in front of Judge Patchel's modest domicile, Deshong showed reluctance to climb down.

"Dunno as I'll be welcome," he said. "Ol' judge approved the verdict, time I was tried, but he gave me a lecture on shootin' afterward."

"Come on," urged Cheyney. "This is law and order business, as much as if we were wearin' tin-badges."

THEY found the judge in a book-lined rear room, perusing a law journal, with bottle and glass beside him on a table. He greeted Cole warm-

ly, was less cordial to Deshong, obviously puzzled at seeing him there. Patchel brought extra glasses and poured drinks for his visitors.

"Judge," said Cheyney, "would it surprise you to learn Lenora Quillen is back on the Long Rail?"

Judge Patchell gripped the arms of his chair. "You can't mean it! I never knew what became of the poor girl after Pat Quillen was hung in his own dooryard, on false evidence. Nothing I could do, though. Terry Magill—"

"I know his part in it," interrupted Cole, "and have surrendered all claim to the place."

He explained where Lenora Quillen had been keeping herself since her father's death, how Deshong had happened along and offered the service of his guns. The judge looked at Jimmy with a new respect.

"You never mentioned the girl, even when you were on trial for your life," remarked Patchel. "How was that?"

"Afraid some of the sheep crowd would sneak over to the homesteader's and do away with Nora," replied Deshong. "Wanted to have her ranch ready and waitin' before I brought her back."

"Young man," said Judge Patchel, solemnly, "I have a better opinion of you than formerly. And you Cheyney, have acted a white man's role. But don't think the sheep kings will give up easily."

"We know we've a fight on our hands," nodded the cowboy, and spoke of the plan to prevent Spale's eviction. "Have to whittle 'em down some with .45's, though I hope to drag the ringleaders into court finally."

"I shall take great pleasure in presiding at their trial." The judge filled his glass, turned the bourbon down his gullet and slowly wiped his lips. "You might call yourselves a vigilance committee. One is usually needed in a community when the law has lost its stirrups. But don't go too far, shoot without good cause or destroy property."

Cole Cheyney recalled Patchel's words as he sat his horse atop a wooded knoll, facing the west, on another afternoon. Beside him, in saddles, were Jimmy Deshong and the baldheaded cowman, Spale. Behind the trio were grouped Jimmy's gunriders and several Spale cowhands. A mile eastward stood the Tin Cup ranch buildings. The eyes of the men were fixed on a great dust cloud filming the distant western slopes.

Link Spale exploded, "That's the dust of a woolly flock! Too dang big for any bunch of horsemen they could muster!"

"Bringin' in sheep before you're even off the land!" growled Deshong.

At the foot of the dust-smoky slant ran Spale's west line fence. But that barrier wouldn't halt the invasion.

"Let's go," said Cole Cheyney, "before they start cuttin' fence!"

LIFTING his reins, Cheyney descended the hillock with the rest trailing behind him. They were halfway across the pasture, when a dozen or more horsebackers detached themselves from the flock and spurred at the fence. Two vacated saddles were bent over the rust-red strands of barbed wire, which presently sagged to earth. Riders poured through the gap, while the pair with wire-cutters strode in opposite directions to drop adjoining sections of fence.

Cheyney heard Spale and Deshong cursing above the hoofbeats. He threw a sidelong glance to observe that both were fisting six-shooters, waiting only for the yardage to decrease sufficiently before they opened up.

"The sheriff's with that outfit," hollered Cole, who had caught the flash of a law badge. "Let them roll smoke first!"

Joe Keenan, the "sheepmen's sheriff," tossed a hand high as the two parties hammered to within pistol-shot of each other. Cole got his initial look at the peace officer and wasn't prepossessed by the heavy-jowled face, with small, piggish eyes. Pete Mc-

Swingle rode beside Keenan, but Hyatt and Harmer were absent. The rest of the band had the appearance of plug-uglies, quick with guns, not the innocuous type that Cole associated with sheepherding.

"Spale," yelled Keenan, tugging to a stop, "you was supposed to be off this land by noon today! What's the reason you're still here?"

Old Link had holstered his gun, he shook a knotted fist. "Useless question, Joe! You know the mortgage money was stole off me by them as wanted the Tin Cup for sheep, and that three days' notice ain't legal! Take a good look at these fellers sidin' me before you start evictin'!"

"We expected opposition," growled the sheriff, "and I'd 'a' fetched warrants for those outlaws, only Judge Patchel wouldn't issue them."

"Reckon you could serve the warrants if you had 'em?" sneered Jimmy Deshong.

"I arrested you once," Keenan glowered at him, "and you cheated the rope! The next time—"

"Here's your chance!" flared Jimmy, swinging lithely down.

His boots had barely touched earth when Keenan flung sideways in the saddle and fired from the hip. Deshong lurched, crossed hands on his chest and tossed out the armpit guns. The muzzles were aflame as he drew and dust puffed from Sheriff Keenan's coat. His mouth opened, but no sound came from it, and his pistol slanted down. He pitched loosely off his horse.

Steel rasped from every holster in the opposing outfits. Bursts of fire-shot powdersmoke and the savage clamor of fighting men. Wild-eyed horses rearing, throwing dead riders. Cole Cheyney emptied two saddles, dropped a bronc kicking. Deshong, wounded and trying to remount while his buckskin pitched, was crowded against Cole. The cowboy grabbed a fistful of Jimmy's shirt and lifted. Deshong hung a leg over leather, found the stirrups and stood in them, his Colts drumming above his horse's flattened ears.

Cheyney pegged away two-handed at the wheeling McSwingle riders. As his mount whirled rightabout, the flockmaster faced back, slashing muzzle-fire. Cole drew down on him, but another rider on a pain-crazed bronc bucked in between them as the hammer fell, took Cole's bullet.

McSwingle spurred away, his henchman striving to hip in the saddle for a blast at Cheyney. But, bored through, the gunman fired wild and lost his balance. His right boot hung in the stirrup and his body went jerking along the ground, a dead weight that the frantic horse couldn't get rid of.

THE sheepmen ran and the range defenders swept forward, Cheyney, Deshong and old Spale in the front line of pursuit, swinging .45's that spurted red at every jump of their horses. All had reloaded. A good deal of ammunition had been used up, not much of it wasted.

Two of Spale's cowhands and one Deshong rider stayed behind, sprawled in the short grass. The invaders had lost more heavily, but they were still dangerous. The wicked whine of bullets from up ahead continuously filled Cheyney's ears as he pounded west, and there wasn't much use in ducking. He didn't, yet somehow shaved disaster.

The fleeing riders had almost reached the gap in the line fence. The two fence-cutters had been joined by herders from the big flock outside. There were enough of them to replace McSwingle's fallen gunmen and launch a counter-attack, if they had the courage. In cow country feuds, the sheep-tender had never been rated a warrior. With six-shooters bared, the reinforcements lingered at the posts from which the wire had been stripped.

Pete McSwingle roared at them to wade in. Their guns spat a ragged line of flame at the grim riders rampag-

ing after the flockmaster and four gunmen, who were all that lived to recross the invaded land. The beaten gang flashed by, unable to stop their horses quickly, and the uneasy herders were exposed to a lethal fire.

"Woolly nurses—ba-a-a!" bleated Jimmy Deshong. "Shoot 'em down like gophers!"

Several herders, plucked from saddles by bullets, were writhing on the ground. The rest didn't wait for further shortening of the gun range, but turned and fled toward the sheep-packed slopes. One unhorsed herder had fallen by a post. Holding onto it, he struggled half upright, bent his Colt on Jimmy Deshong. Jimmy's eyes widened surprisedly in the same instant that his right-hand smoker cut a short arc and dropped the herder at the foot of the fence post.

McSwingle saw the futility of attempting to rally his forces. Flanked by the four gunmen, he charged uphill, and the panicked herders trailed them in the scramble for life. The frightened sheep undulated like troubled waters, their pattering feet raising a wall of yellow dust which hid the horsemen skirting a flank of the herd. Sharp-voiced collies with lolling tongues raced madly to and fro, helpless to control the mass movement.

Cole Cheyney, his smoke-poles empty, pulled up short of the wide-spreading flock. His companions drew in beside him. A few minutes earlier they might have followed McSwingle's outfit around one wing. But now both sides were blocked by shifting, solid bands of gray. No horse could keep its feet for many yards through that living barrier.

"Pete's makin' his getaway," snorted Spale, breaking his gun to reload, "but the sheep and the dogs are still here. We'll clean 'em up!"

"No!" Cole vetoed hastily. "We've chased McSwingle off your ranch. That's enough for this time."

"We ain't got five-six thousand cartridges to waste on 'em," Jimmy Deshong thrust forward sweat-streaked face, "and besides, old Link, they're Cole's sheep!"

"Mine!" exclaimed Cheyney. "How do you know?"

"Notice the herder I drilled at a fence post, comin' through?" said Deshong. "Well, it was Dugdale, Magill's foreman. Some others looked like Magill's herders, too. The bunch we drove into the hills with their dogs. If McSwingle stole your sheep, it's likely he killed my two boys guardin' 'em—"

"We'd better be gettin' back to the Long Rail, then," broke in Cheyney, "and see if Lenora's safe! Soon as we can get by this flock."

Deshong gave him a suspicious look, as if fear of being supplanted by a rival had crossed his mind. "You've taken the words out of my mouth, Cheyney!"

CHAPTER VI

Killer on the Prod

IT WAS late afternoon when Cole and the Deshong pistoleers, following Smoky River westward, came to the empty grazing ground and found the two reluctant sheep-tenders, victims of lead poisoning. Tobin and Danvers had been dead at least twenty-four hours.

Probably McSwingle's gang had attacked them early the previous day, thus allowing plenty of time to move the big flock toward Spale's range, which the sheep king had expected to occupy. Apparently McSwingle and Hyatt were keeping hands off the Quillen land until Cheyney and the Deshong riders had been driven out.

The dead men were hastily buried and the party headed south for the ranch. But Lenora wasn't there. Cole and Jimmy faced each other in the living room after a thorough search.

"She was alone only from the time we left this mornin' for the Tin Cup," said the cowboy grimly. "But they may have had someone watchin' the

house. Possibly took her as a hostage."

"Could be!" Jimmy growled. "Before we start huntin' at McSwingle's or Hyatt's, let's ride to Lodgepole. Might pick up a clue there, and this wound the sheriff gimme needs lookin' at."

They rejoined the men in front of the ranch house and turned off for town. The sun was low as they filed into the main street. Some cattlemen burst out of a saloon and halted them to ask eagerly how the fight at Spale's had terminated. More cowmen and punchers swelled the group while Deshong, rather boastfully, told of the sheriff's death and the rout of the McSwingle forces. The news was received with exultant yells.

"It's the beginnin' of the end, Jimmy!" shouted a lank cattleman, Ab Fargo. "If we gang up and go after 'em now, mebbe we can make a clean sweep! Will you lead us?"

"Sure," replied Deshong. "We'll talk it over soon's the doc has fixed up a hole in my side. Got to move a little cautious, because Nora Quillen's disappeared and we figure she's held prisoner."

"She's right here in Lodgepole," informed Fargo. "Locked up. Keenan's deputy, Shotwell, brought her before noon, handcuffed. When we protested, Shotwell was goin' to cut loose. They've sort of fortified the calaboose."

"Nora locked up!" Deshong turned to look at Cole with blazing eyes.

"C'mon," Cheyney said, his lips a thin line, and he reined through the crowd with the gunhawk. "Take it easy, Jimmy. I think I understand the setup. They figured they could hold her easier in town, under the protection of the so-called law, than at one of the sheep ranches. Knew we'd try to rescue her instead of makin' terms."

"She ain't stayin' there!" gritted Jimmy.

"No," said Cole, "not if she can be got out safely."

THEY rounded in front of the calaboose and Cheyney was first up the steps, for he perceived that Deshong wasn't in a mood to exercise caution. He noticed three freshly cut loopholes in the door and a rifle barrell suddenly protruded from the middle slot.

"Turn back, Cheyney, or I'll dust you both sides!" warned the voice of Deputy Sheriff Shotwell.

"I just learned Miss Quillen's bein' detained here," said Cole quietly. "What's the charge against her?"

"Tyin' up McSwingle and Hyatt at the point of a gun and tryin' to shoot Lawyer Harmer," replied the unseen deputy. "You know it as well as I do. We've got the wildcat where she belongs."

"Like to speak to her," Cole went on. He heard Deshong breathing heavily a step or two below him and hoped Jimmy wouldn't attempt to put a bullet through the wide gun slot, for the rifle bore full on Cole's chest.

"You can't!" snapped Shotwell. "Unless Keenan wants to let you when he comes back."

"Afraid I'd have to wait a long time, then!" Cole detected the man's gasp of astonishment, knew by the lowering of the rifle barrel that he was momentarily stunned. Cheyney's oak-tough hands clamped on the steel tube, wrenched it to one side as the muzzle flamed. He crashed the butt against the door lock in two powerful strokes.

The lock was shattered. Cole followed the inswinging door with the Winchester reversed. The muzzle stopped against the midsection of the stumbling deputy, hurled off balance by the cowboy's sudden drive from the other side and prevented from using his drawn pistol.

"Throw it away!" commanded Cheyney, and the six-gun hit the floor. "Now, march to Miss Quillen's cell and let her out!"

Jimmy Deshong came through the doorway, a Colt in each hand. He walked beside Cheyney to the cell-room. Deputy Shotwell paused before

a wooden door with a wicket. He unlocked the door, moved back—then pitched down with a scream of agony as guns roared. Cole swung angrily on Jimmy, who flanked smoking sixes.

"What'd you do that for? Wasn't necessary. Murder, in fact. The fellow was unarmed and doin' as he was told."

Deshong's lips curled back from his teeth. "I'm cuttin' down this sheep gang regardless, from now on!"

Lenora Quillen emerged from the cell door, one hand at her throat, her gaze fastened on the dying deputy. When she looked at Jimmy he tried hard to grin, though his eyes were tigerish.

"You see what I do to fellows that lay hands on you, honey. I'm done bein' easy on' em." He saw by her expression that she disapproved.

"I think Cole's right," said Lenora. "It was awful to shoot him down that way."

"Oh, Cole's right and I'm wrong, eh?" Jimmy gave the cowboy an ugly look.

IGNORING him, Cole said to Lenora, "I reckon Shotwell dropped in at the ranch soon after we'd left and took you by surprise?"

She nodded. "And without any warrant except his gun."

"Yet you two say fellows like Shotwell ain't deservin' to be gunned like mad wolves!" snarled Deshong.

"Riles me, too," said Cheyney, "but we're not murderers. If we didn't draw the line at some things, we'd be as bad as they are."

Jimmy sneered and offered his arm to the girl. "Comin', Nora? We'll pick up a gun for you in the office."

She stepped to his side and Cheyney followed them out of the jail. Deshong's riders were dismounting at the curb. A block away the cattlemen were coming on foot.

"We don't need you," Jimmy rapped at his men, still in a bad humor. "Here she is, free as the air."

That night the cowmen, standing with the Deshong gang at the Maverick bar, celebrated the repulse of the sheepmen at Spale's as if it were their own victory. And, in a way, it was. Any back-set to McSwingle or Hyatt helped them all. If they rallied now behind Cheyney and Deshong, it was not too much to hope for complete victory.

Cole wasn't in the saloon, having gone to visit Judge Patchel after supper. Around nine o'clock, hurried steps sounded on the judge's porch, a rap fell on the door. Patchel opened it to admit a pale-lipped Lenora, who announced:

"They're going after the sheepmen tonight—with dynamite! Jimmy has gone killing mad, and the rest are so wild with drink they'll follow him in anything. Cole, you've got to stop them!"

Cheyney's face set in hard lines. "The judge and I were discussin' Deshong. It seems he has good points, but a lot more bad ones, and the worst side is uppermost. Where are they?"

"In Guthrie's store," Lenora told him. "Guthrie sells dynamite to miners working on the north side of the Smokies. Keeps it in a stone storehouse at the rear. I followed those wild men there, tried to talk Jimmy out of it, but he wouldn't listen. They're all in a dangerous mood. Maybe you'd better not—"

He pushed her gently aside. "I'm partly responsible for this. Thought I could keep a more or less tight rein on Jimmy, but it looks— Wait here!"

He passed quickly out of the house and swung to his horse, standing at the front. Judge Patchel, soberer than usual, listened to the receding hoofbeats, then seized Lenora's hand.

"We'll follow—he may need us. Deshong talked fair when he was here to see me with Cole, I hoped he might live down his wildness and become a useful citizen. But I guess there's no reforming an outlaw!"

"Outlaw?" repeated Lenora, as they were going through the door. "I never thought he was one—but the way

he killed Shotwell, and the thing he's planning to do— Judge, I'm all confused! Jimmy did me a good turn. I liked him."

"Naturally," replied Patchel, "that would attract you to him. But don't let it break your heart if he turns out badly. Cole Cheyney, now, he's a real man."

Lenora said nothing as they hurried toward the center of town.

COLE had stopped his horse at Guthrie's, where other saddle horses were clustered. There was a confused noise of men's voices and boots clacking to and fro inside the store. The cowboy moved into the light, to discover Deshong men and cattlemen emptying barrels of sugar, flour, pickles, crackers on the floor. Jimmy, one of the few who wasn't drunk, was directing things in his shrill voice.

"Don't forget the heads for them barrels," he cried. "We'll need a wagon to carry our stuff. Stop your yappin', Guthrie!" He turned fiercely on the protesting storekeeper. "You want the sheepmen blotted out, don'tcha?"

"But I don't want my store wrecked!" yelled Guthrie. "Who's to pay for all this?"

"You'll get paid!" snapped Jimmy. "Sometime."

He felt a hard hand on his shoulder and spun to face Cole.

"This business of fightin' with dynamite don't go!" the cowboy said in a steely voice. "It's wholesale murder. I told you—"

"No difference what you told me!" snarled Deshong. "It's the quickest way to clean up! We're not only aimin' to dynamite the sheep ranches but to run the flocks into the river by stampedin' horses among 'em rigged with cowbells, fryin'-pans and such clatterin' junk! We're gettin' broncs for that from the town corral. You can go along if you want; if not—"

Cole saw there was no reasoning with him. The killer-light flamed in Jimmy's eyes, and next minute he'd be snatching out a gun. The cowboy knew he couldn't kill Deshong and survive to do what he regarded as his duty. There were too many of Deshong's outlaws in that store, and even the cowmen, in their drunken madness, might turn on him.

Jimmy read stern opposition in Cole's glance and his right hand started up. Before it touched a gun butt, Cole's blocked right whipped against Jimmy's chin. It lifted him clear of the floor. Cheyney swung about, knocked two cursing cowmen out of his path with a driving shoulder and was through the doorway before the crowd could collect its wits. As he ran toward his horse, two figures on the sidewalk caught his eye and he paused an instant.

"They're bent on carryin' it through," Cole spoke rapidly to Lenor. and the judge. "I just knocked Jimmy down and they'll be after me. I've no use for the sheepmen, but I'm warnin' 'em to ride out before it's too late. And, judge, wire the governor for help! I reckon there'll be need of troops, no matter when they get here."

A GUN banged from the store doorway and Cheyney felt a bullet tug his sleeve. He jumped for his saddle, and with body bent, sent the horse leaping diagonally across the street. He had his eye on a dark alleyway, wide enough for the passage of a single horsebacker. It was a short cut to the northern range and he would be a dim target sooner than if he rode to the end of the block. Several guns were now roaring and the voice of Jimmy Deshong cut piercingly through the heavy blasts:

"Careful, boys! Don't hit the girl!"

Girl! Pounding over the sidewalk, aimed for the alley's mouth, Cheyney screwed in the saddle. A horse was plunging after him, with Lenora Quillen topping it. The stirrups, too long for her, larruped the sides of the mount she had evidently lifted from the group by the store. Men were dart-

ing over the sidewalk to swing to leather, and the gunfire slackened. Cole could not discern the tall figure of Judge Patchel. Perhaps they had shot him. The cowboy tugged rein at the alley entrance, but Lenora cried frenziedly:

"Keep going, Cole! I'm coming with you!"

He loosened rein with a yell and his mount shot ahead. Cheyney heard Lenora's horse strike the passageway. Emerging at the far end, he pulled to one side and presently the girl bolted from the alley. Gun in hand, the cowboy moved to stop up the outlet. The clatter of many hoofs rose at the other end. He waited for the sound to draw closer, then fire spat from his Colt muzzle. There was the crash of a horse going down. Yelling and spurts of pistol flame, which didn't advance beyond a certain point. Cole rode after Lenora.

"With that downed horse blockin' the alley," he cried, "they'll have to go back and around by the cross street. Did they kill the judge?"

"He got away," the girl's answer drifted to Cole as they galloped with the wind in their throats. "I knew you'd have difficulty finding McSwingle's and Hyatt's ranches, as you've never been to either. I'm surprised at myself, riding to save the men responsible for all my troubles, but the thought of their being blown to bits is too horrible. If I made no effort to prevent it, the memory would haunt me forever!"

"We're two of a kind, Lenora," declared Cheyney. "Must do what we can or we couldn't hold up our heads among square folk afterward." He told of Deshong's plan to destroy the sheep. "We'll strike McSwingle's first. While you warn the herders to get the flocks into coulees or any place where they can't be easily stampeded, I'll go to the ranch."

"Do my best to locate the camps," replied Lenora. Then asked, as the cowboy twisted for a backward look: "Jimmy coming?"

"No sign of pursuit," said Cheyney. "He knows he hasn't any time to lose transportin' his blastin' material up this way. I wonder what he wanted them barrels for?"

CHAPTER VII

Rolling Barrels

COLE CHEYNEY watched Lenora Quillen vanish up the dark range in search of Pete McSwingle's sheep camps, then turned his horse toward the spot of light, a half mile eastward, which the girl had pointed out as McSwingle's headquarters. Unsure of his reception, despite his errand of mercy, Cole halted his horse at a row of sheep pens behind the main house and went forward on foot. He was not aware that a man slipped along in the shadows, trailing him.

The cowboy paused beneath a side window, the lower sash of which was raised. The sound of many voices filled the room and he recognized those of McSwingle, Hyatt and Lawyer Harmer. They were discussing McSwingle's defeat at Spale's ranch and what to do about it. Harmer remarked that the theft of old Link's three thousand dollars by a couple of Pete's men hadn't worked out as they had expected.

Cole found a break in the outer wall boards where he could insert a boot toe, reached a long arm to the sill above, and rose waist-high to the open window. He thrust head and shoulders through the aperture, a gun in extended right hand. The big room was blue with tobacco smoke, and so crowded there weren't chairs for half the men present, many standing along the walls. The two flockmasters and Harmer were seated at a table. Nobody noticed the man at the window until he spoke.

"Council of war, eh? Quite a flock of buzzards!"

Heads jerked at the sound of his voice. Harmer and the sheep kings started from their chairs. Several gun

hirelings dropped hands to sheathed steel.

"I can stop any man before he clears his shootin'-iron! Everybody take it easy!"

"Deshong's gang out there with you?" demanded Burton Harmer, sweat beading his forehead.

"No," replied Cheyney, "but he's on his way—to dynamite the sheep outfits. You've no reason to expect it of me, but I've come ahead of him, to tell you to clear out of Smoky River. Not bein' a bloodthirsty man, I couldn't stand for the use of dynamite, much as you may deserve wipin' out. Miss Quillen, feelin' the same way in spite of all you've done to her, has gone to warn your herders, Pete. Oh, yes, we took her from jail—"

He ceased talking as he felt a hand clutch his booted leg and a gun dig his hip.

"Wait," said Cheyney to the frozen crowd. "There's somebody out here wants to see me."

"Drop the smoker and git down easy!" gruffed a voice below as he took his head out of the window. "Drill you if you act smart!"

Cole's gun thumped to earth and he followed it, stood while the watchman lifted his second .45. Striding ahead of the fellow, he entered the front door of the ranch house. He blinked in the glare of kerosene lamps while men crowded around, not to shake his hand and express gratitude for his warning, but to seize him roughly, cursing him. The cowboy ended up in a chair, with hands and feet tightly bound.

STANDING before the prisoner, McSwingle bellowed: "It don't make sense! You smoked us up a plenty at the Tin Cup, now you're tryin' to save our lives. I think you're bluffin'. You hope we'll run to escape the dynamite, and you 'n' Deshong will be rid of us without further gunplay. I know he was hurt today."

"A fair gunfight," replied Cole, looking at him steadily, "is one thing. Blowin' a man apart so's there ain't enough of him left to bury is somethin' else, the kind of warfare I won't take a hand in. I wouldn't let a dog die that way if I could help it."

"Maybe he's telling the truth, Pete," spoke Burton Harmer nervously. "That Deshong's nothing but a dirty little murderer."

McSwingle snorted, "There's times you make me sick, Burt, showin' the white feather! What's your idea, Tony?"

"I figure Cheyney's lyin'," replied Hyatt. "Thinks we're ready to quit because he turned you back from Spale's."

But some of the gunmen sided with Harmer, and the argument continued for some time. Finally, two pistoleers were sent on a scout down the trail, to see if the Deshong gang and the cattlemen were coming. An hour or two went by and they hadn't returned. McSwingle and Hyatt declared that the pair had coyoted, fled in groundless terror. Harmer and others were of the opinion Deshong's gang had got them, though there had been no sound of shooting.

But at gray dawn the sheep kings learned their error in thinking Cole Cheyney was trying to scare them out of the country. McSwingle's cook left the house by the rear door, to fill a pail at the creek. A .45 bellowed, and when men crowded to the back windows in sudden alarm, they saw the cook's body lying half submerged in the stream. In the brush, a hundred yards behind the ranch, sinister figures skulked and Pete McSwingle opened the back door on a crack to shout:

"Clear out of that! Hyatt and me are both here, with all our Coltmen!"

"That's good hearin'!" someone hollered from the brush. "You're surrounded. Wait till the dynamite starts rollin' in!"

"What's he mean—rollin' in?" Pete faced the others, licking dry lips.

They were not long kept in doubt.

Cole Cheyney, still chair-bound in the living room, could see through a

front window. He observed that the sheep ranch was situated at the bottom of a depression, with sloping clay walls rising before it, two hundred yards away. The cowboy saw a wagon and riderless horses on the rim, and men moving among them.

BARRELS were lifted from the wagon, over which the men bent at some task. Cole caught the flash of an ax in the rising sun. Suddenly he understood why the gang had raided Guthrie's store for barrels. As one was rolled to the edge of the declivity, he yelled to the men at the rear:

"Here comes the dynamite!"

Feet stampeded to the living room, Harmer saying tremulously, "Where, where?"

"Look yonder!" snapped Cole.

Instantly both windows were filled with strained faces.

"I see a barrel rollin' thisaway!" exclaimed McSwingle.

"With dynamite inside," declared Cole grimly. "Don't you savvy, you boxhead? They dropped a charge, with detonator cap and long fuse, into the barrel. Nailed on the barrel head to keep the dynamite from fallin' out while it was in motion. Lighted the fuse through a hole chopped in one end of the barrel, just before they let it roll."

Fear-stricken, the sheep kings and their hirelings watched the rapid progress of the death-laden barrel down the sloping wall. Cole's view was cut off by the onlookers crowded into each window, but he braced himself for a rending explosion.

"Look!" yelled Tony Hyatt. "It hit a rock—it's boundin' off to one side!"

A moment or two of silence, except for the labored breathing of the sheepmen, then a window-shattering roar! Harmer screeched:

"See the hole it tore in the ground! We'll be blown to tatters if the next barrel strikes the house!"

"Shut up, Bart!" hollered McSwingle, turning swiftly from a broken window. "Boys, grab Cheyney, hustle him out to the hitchin' post before they roll another! He's one of their crowd. Maybe they'll let up if there's danger of killin' him."

Men leaped at the bound cowboy, unroped him with frantic haste, though Cole protested.

"It won't help you. I broke with that gang when I rode to warn you."

He was pulled from the chair, rushed outside as Pete opened the door. While his captors were busy lariating him to the hitching post, Cole saw Deshong staring down from the heights. The young outlaw spoke to his men and another barrel was pushed to the brink of the basin wall.

Hoofs thudded at the corner of the house as the sheepmen retreated indoors. Cheyney was amazed to see Judge Patchel ride around the corner, hatless, looking grimly determined. He shot a glance at Cole, at the barrel coming down the slope and shouted at the top of his voice:

"Deshong, the troops are on the way to end this war! I wired the governor last night!"

Jimmy yelled back curses, but the judge was out of the saddle, slicing Cole's hempen fetters with a clasp knife. The cowboy kept an anxious eye on the barrel rolling toward them. Besides that threat of destruction, he expected shots from the ranch house to plow through him and Patchel at any instant. Shooting broke forth as his legs were freed, but none of it apparently was directed at the cowboy and his rescuer. The deadly barrel was the target.

The sheepmen were attempting to deflect it from its course or explode the dynamite with .45 bullets before it rolled against the house. Cole, swinging up behind Patchel as the latter scrambled into the saddle, saw the barrel spin end for end under the bombardment.

JUDGE PATCHEL dur in spudless heels, and they pounded westward. Cole kept chin against shoulder, observed that the barrel had stopped

rolling, but was near enough the ranch house to do damage when the dynamite let go. The horse was covering ground fast when Cole was dazzled by a glaring light, followed by an ear-bursting detonation.

A blast of air knocked horse and riders to earth. As Cole and the judge picked themselves up, their eyes turned to the ranch. The front wall had caved in and wild shouts welled from the half-wrecked dwelling.

"We've got to make distance, judge," shouted Cole, striding toward the horse, which was getting to its feet. "I warned 'em, but they wouldn't believe me. Look, Deshong's startin' several barrels at once, to finish the job quick!"

The judge was at his heels. "I'd have been up here sooner, to try to stop the slaughter, but I wanted to be sure the governor would act at once. He replied to my message that he had wired the War Department and the colonel commanding Fort Randall, a hundred miles from here. The soldiers won't arrive soon enough to halt this, but they can run out the Deshong gang."

Mounted as before, they rode west again at a gallop. Behind them a thunderous explosion shook the earth, then another. As the riders glanced back, a third barrel blew up and all sign of McSwingle's ranch was blotted out in smoke.

"Bad lot, those sheepmen," remarked the judge, "but they hardly deserved such an end."

Cole's attention was diverted from the burning wreckage of the ranch by a rider suddenly popping out of a gully, between them and the scene of destruction. "There's Nora Quillen! Wondered where she'd got to. Let's ride back now, judge. She don't see us."

Patchel turned his horse. They were close to Lenora when she looked around, pale beneath her tan. The girl appeared vastly relieved at seeing them.

"Isn't that terrible!" She stretched an arm easterly. "I was afraid you might be there, Cole. Guess you were worried I didn't turn up. But I had trouble locating McSwingle's flocks and a harder time convincing the herders I wasn't fooling them. What happened to you?"

"Let's get out of sight first," suggested the cowboy. "Deshong and his men are comin' down that side trail, to look over the result of their dynamitin'. Boulder field yonder's a good place."

The boulders were half a mile nearer the spot where McSwingle's headquarters had stood, but there was no other place offering concealment within easy riding distance. Apparently the outlaws and the cattlemen hadn't seen them when they dismounted in the rock refuge. While Cole recounted his experience at McSwingle's, the eyes of all three followed the horsemen skirting the ruins of the ranch. The cowmen who had been hidden in the brush at the rear joined them. The report of Colt guns sounded distantly.

"Jimmy and his men!" gritted Cheyney. "Drillin' sheepmen that escaped the blasts. I sure made one mad mistake figurin' I could ride along with that band of killers!"

"I see my mistake, too," murmured Lenora. "I thought Jimmy was—look, they're coming this way! Do you suppose they saw us?"

COLE didn't at once reply, watching a group of riders head west, with Jimmy in the lead. The cattlemen lingered by the smoking ruins.

"They know we're here, all right!" Cheyney barked suddenly. "And the sheepmen took my guns." His gaze traveled to the Colt Lenora was wearing. Deshong had picked up gun and belt for her in the sheriff's office after her release.

The girl unbuckled the weapon, saying solemnly, "It's you or Jimmy, Cole! Don't lose!"

Throwing the belt around his waist,

he answered as gravely, "I won't, Nora!"

"I've a gun here," spoke Judge Patchel. "As you're much the better shot, take mine, too."

"No," replied the cowboy, "use it on Deshong's men yourself. I can't watch the whole gang."

They crouched low behind a rocky barrier and the sound of approaching horses came clearer. Jimmy's voice reached them, addressing his saddlemates:

"Never get the chance now to set ourselves up in the cow grabbin' business. Have to skip before them soldiers arrive from Randall. Some of 'em would be sure to recognize us as the fellows who tried to lift cavalry horses and gunned three troopers in the getaway."

"After cleanin' up them sheepmen," another voice broke in, raspingly, "all we get out of it is the money we took in the stage holdups, which is near gone! Poor pickin's, Jimmy!"

"There's still the Lodgepole Bank," said Deshong. "We're shakin' the cowmen and headin' out by way of town. The girl goes with me, after I've settled Cheyney. They're in here somewhere, for I seen 'em from the top of the basin wall. Nora, Cheyney, and the judge. Probably listenin' to us this minute. Spread out, boys, and ride slow toward the center to surround 'em. Nora's got a gun."

Cole removed his hat, raised his head above the slanting rock until he could observe the horsemen riding left and right along the borders of the field. Jimmy Deshong sat his buckskin alone, his gaze roving the jumbled rocks. He lifted the reins and the horse moved forward at a walk.

Cole rose to his feet and strode out in full view of the young bandit. Jimmy checked rein.

"We should've settled this, Jimmy," spoke the cowboy, "the day we first met. But I didn't know you as well as I do now."

"I ought've knowed I couldn't pal up with a fellow who'd been a lawman!" sneered Deshong. "Just took you on trial, anyhow. Wanted the use of your guns."

"Get down!" barked Cheyney.

Jimmy rolled from his saddle, cool and confident. "Nora ain't goin' to like the way you'll look after I'm through!"

"Draw!" snapped Cole.

Deshong grinned irritatingly, hooking thumbs in the armholes of his vest. He evidently hoped to ruffle the cowboy, cause him to throw his shot wide. But Cole stood calmly waiting. He knew that he must hit this dangerous killer in a vital spot as he drew. Even then Deshong might get him.

IT WAS Jimmy whose patience wore thin. Cole saw his grin fade, a look of doubt enter his cold eyes. His hands crossed, quicker than eye could follow, flipping the guns from armpit holsters with the hammers eared back. But he bent from the middle at the instant of firing.

Cole's .45 had leaped from holster to hand, spitting a slug that tore through Jimmy's left side over the heart. He reeled on rubbery legs, striving to bring his flaming guns to level, but only pockmarking the hard earth with bullet holes. Cole fired three times before Jimmy fell down, gasping:

"Faster—than—me! I wouldn't—"

With the sentence unfinished, he died.

A gun banging rearward of him whirled Cole on his toes. He couldn't see Judge Patchel, but an in-galloping horseman suddenly plunged from sight. Another showed up on the right and Cheyney's .45 bounced in his hand. Judge Patchel fired again, a shot answering him. Cole ran back to his friends, while Patchel and the other marksmen continued shooting.

Jumping past Lenora, who was on her knees, the cowboy caught glimpse of a dismounted outlaw, dodging from boulder to boulder. The bandit stopped

in the open, his knees bending, as Cole targeted him with the last bullet in his gun.

"That's all," said Patchel, with a sigh. "I haven't lost my shooting eye."

The cattlemen and their hands came swinging over the eastern border of the field. Cheyney, flanked on one side by Lenora, on the other by Judge Patchel, walked toward them. They were staring at the body of Deshong.

"This looks like your work, Cheyney!" growled Ab Fargo. "Jimmy helped us smash the sheepmen—"

"Fargo," broke in Patchel sharply, "you should be thanking Cheyney for that killing. Deshong would have treated you fellows as he did the sheepmen, no doubt, had he stayed on the range. He couldn't stay because he had killed some soldiers at Fort Randall, and the troops are coming here. He intended kidnaping Nora Quillen and robbing the Lodgepole Bank, as he fled. I guess that'll change your tune, Fargo!"

Fargo glanced at his companions, slowly nodded. "If it's all as you say, judge—"

"It is!" snapped Patchel. "You men haven't covered yourselves with glory. The sheepmen were defeated, and that had to be, yes. But the way it was done!"

" 'Twas sickenin', Judge," admitted Fargo. "We didn't realize how bad it would be, that's a fact. The whole bunch of us was drunk, if it's any excuse."

"Not much of one," snorted Patchel. "Where are the horses you had fixed up with bells and such to stampede the sheep?"

"Down yonder, judge."

"Well, take them back to town when you go. And pay Guthrie for the damage you did his store. I'll have more to say about this later. From now on we're going to have law and order at Smoky River. Might even persuade Cole Cheyney to run for sheriff. I reckon he's locating here."

Cowmen and cowboys wheeled their horses and trotted away. Judge Patchel turned to Cole and Lenora. They were holding hands.

"I didn't make any mistake about your becoming a Smoky River citizen, did I, Cole?" the judge twinkled.

"No," said Cole. "Did he, Nora?"

Lenora shook her head, smiling.

"We'll round up all the sheep, give the herders a few hours to quit the range," went on Cheyney. "And when the flocks are sold, there'll be a tidy sum to put cattle back on the Long Rail."

"Fine!" enthused the judge. He made a rasping sound in his throat. "Cole, you don't happen to have a flask about you?"

"Sorry," grinned the cowboy.

"I was afraid you hadn't. I'm dry as a bone. There's a creek over by the dynamited ranch, and—" Patchel grimaced— "I suppose I'll have to be content with that until we get back to Lodgepole. No doubt you two have things to talk over."

He started away on foot, smiling across his shoulder at the happy-faced couple.

One-Man Vigilante

By Anson Hard

He was only a younker who had a yen for mining. But he became a man overnight when he staked a claim that spouted a gunsmoke bonanza.

THE doors of the Eldorado Saloon shoved outward. A pock-marked individual with ferret eyes came stamping onto the porch.

"Hey, you, cut out that noise!"

Chet Whitaker looked up. He was little more than a kid, but he had the assurance that comes early to men in the West. "Shucks, can't a feller play a mouth organ in this here town?"

"Not if the chief says you can't. Now, dry up."

Whitaker paused. Several men on the plank walks stopped to observe the

altercation. A prospector with a face like seamed granite took a step forward. The kid held the instrument a few inches from his lips and looked over it at the man who commanded him.

"I reckon neither you nor your boss own the atmosphere." Before anyone could stop him he had run three measures of jig time on the harmonica.

The ferret-eyed man scowled. His boot drew back to kick. "I wouldn't do that, Simmons!" snapped the prospector, and his hand dropped to his forty-four.

Whitaker jumped to his feet. He wasn't wearing a gun, but he wasn't asking anyone else to do his fighting for him.

The pockmarked speaker was suddenly shoved aside. A man pushed through the batwing doors with the stalking, noiseless steps of an Apache. His face was a bloodless white which the sun never tanned nor excitement reddened. His hair was deeply black but lacking entirely in luster, and the eyes were an opaque gray that defied the watcher to analyze.

The kid stood speechless, a strange shiver racing up and down his spine.

"Don't play that again," said the white-faced man. There was no inflection to his words; the syllables followed each other tonelessly.

"Why?" Whitaker gulped. "You got plenty music in that barroom of your'n."

The interior of the Eldorado was a medley of sounds. A tinpanny melodeon mixed its melodies with the wailing of a cheap violin. There was loud talk, laughter, and the click of chips.

"Just the same," answered the gambler, "I'm tellin' you to keep that thing silent."

A strange fear assailed Chet Whitaker, more dread than any physical alarm. He had never looked into eyes so utterly cold, nor viewed a face so lacking in human warmth.

"And—if I do play?"

THE opaque eyes never changed; the face did not move an extra muscle. "Play that again, and I'll kill you!" declared the gambler.

The kid didn't reply. The instrument slowly lowered from his lips. He held the other's gaze unblinkingly, but there was a slow beating down of the youth's courage by the unrelenting gaze of the gambler.

The prospector stepped down into the street beside the kid. He didn't say anything, but his manner was an indication to accompany him down the street. Whitaker felt the wordless advice and thrust the harmonica into his pocket. He saw the gambler turn and shove at the doors of the saloon. A devil of impudence rose in him. Words came when he should have been silent.

"All right, Mister Biled Shirt. When I get ready to die, I'll come and play to you."

The black-coated man whirled. His eyes seemed to sink into his head, the skin to tighten across his teeth.

The prospector seized Chet Whitaker. He whirled the kid around and hustled him down the street. "You fool, you young fool!" he said. "You was so nigh dead then, there was dirt fallin' on your face!"

The kid was shaken. He let the other hasten him along. About them flowed the traffic of a boom mining town. A gold rush was on in full swing. Men on horseback shuttled between burros and pack mules. A huge freighting wagon with a six-mule team lumbered by. The plank walks were beehives of pedestrians. The town of Blackrock had blossomed from a single stage station to a town of thousands overnight.

The prospector dragged Whitaker into a recess beside a store. "What's the idea? Got a yen to be starin' up at a spade?"

"I was out in the street. I wasn't botherin' that gambler."

"Jest the same, he thinks so. Keep out of his way."

"All right, I ain't carin' to hug an'

kiss him. I come out here to dig gold."

"So did I—if I can find it."

The hum and activity of the street, passing only a few paces from them, stirred them both. Yet the kid, with the tenacity of youth, could not keep his questions down.

"Why has that buzzard got it in for a harmonica?"

"Superstition. All cardsharks is superstitious, but he's the worst. He hates a harmonicer worse'n a cotton field nigger hates black cats. Says they bring him bad luck. He's a tough hombre with a weapon—greased lightnin' with a shoulder gun. Don't you sass him no more, kid."

A man swept in from the street. He came like a twister from the desert, shaking the dust from him. He fell upon the man beside Whitaker like a long lost brother.

"Well, crock me for a centipede, if it ain't Jim Bowers. Touch my hide, you ole chuckwalla lizard you! Ain't seen your ugly face since Springer's Gulch. Got your claim yet?"

Bowers was less demonstrative than the other, but he shook the man's hand warmly. "Jerkline Travers, the on'riest mixture of human cussedness west of Dodge City! Here, meet the kid—say, what handle you go by, younker?"

"Call me Chet."

"Meet Chet. Him an' you orta get along fine, Jerkline—both lackin' in brains. Chet's jest been fool enough to sass Ace Dowdy."

TRAVERS clicked his lips. "That's bad. You might as well kiss a rattler. Some day, somebody's goin' to take a day off an' crimp that feller's Stetson. In the meantime we gotta pan gravel. You fellers couldn't do better'n come along with me."

The two fell into a talk on placer mining. Chet listened wholeheartedly. He had everything to learn on the matter of mining. The two talked of free ore and rock lodes, of pyrites and amalgams, of sluices and rockers, until Chet's head was spinning with mining terms. Jerkline had struck pay dirt in a gulch several miles south of the original strike, and he urged Bowers to stake alongside of him.

"Better trail along too, younker," he invited.

Again that impulsive utterance swept Chet. "Can I play my harmonica there?" he questioned.

"You're too-tootin' you can," agree Jerkline. "I like music. An' say, that gives me an idea. I been searchin' for a name. We'll call it Harmonica Gulch. Come on, you Harmonica Gulchers."

Thus was a geographical name born and a human trio welded into being. Bowers and Jerkline were old friends, and they took the kid in out of pure kindness of heart. He had a horse and a small grubstake. They advised him what to buy, and before the next sundown there were three claims staked in Harmonica Gulch.

For a while they had this gully to themselves; but the old prospectors knew that this isolation was temporary. Soon the flood of gold seekers would pour in upon them. In the meantime they were making the best of the interval. Chet Whitaker worked like a kid engrossed with a new toy. He swung a pick, shoveled gravel, built sluice boxes as if life depended upon his energy. At night he was so tired that he slept like a man embalmed. The soreness of his muscles wore off in time by continued action.

He was thrown more and more into the spirit and humor of these old sourdoughs. The pair had panned dirt all the way from Sonora to the Yukon. They were prospectors to the core. Chet and Bowers used the same tent. Jerkline had his camp already established a hundred yards farther up the gulch at his first claim.

At night they generally yarned for a while beside one of the fires. Sometimes Chet played his harmonica, and pictures of the gambler flitted into his mind. But usually this fight for yellow metal drove Ace Dowdy and his threats into the back of the kid's head.

But he was soon to be reminded of

the chill-faced gambler. At the first showing of metal in the sluices, Jerkline gave a shout. "It's even better'n I thought it was, but we're losin' metal for lack of boxes. We gotta build sluices twice as long. Kid, you ride into town for the metal grates, an' me an' Jim will start the woodwork. Git goin'."

His enthusiasm stirred Chet. He loped his horse to Blackrock, his mind still drumming with the visions of the brownish yellow flakes that specked the wet gravel. He reached the main street just in time to see Ace Dowdy step into the thoroughfare and start across it.

He noted again the still white face of the gambler, oddly contrasting with the lusterless, dead looking hair. He noted the gloomy gray eyes, that were like screens forever shading the man behind them. He noted the catlike, agile step, the soft pat of the polished boots that lifted no dust behind them.

A MAN stepped outward from a group on the boardwalk. His facial muscles were working, and there was a glitter in his eyes. He wore the rough garments of a miner, and there was a six-gun swinging at his hip. He was a half-dozen paces behind the gambler when he reached the middle of the street.

"Hey, you!" he yelled at Dowdy, and the call was followed by an imprecation that should mean a fight.

The gambler stopped in his tracks, but he did not turn at once. He seemed no more than annoyed by the words of the other.

Ace Dowdy waited silently for the man who had just accosted him to continue. Although he still had not turned around, he was listening.

The cursing miner's hand dropped to his gun. He was mouthing himself to a fury. "You're a damn tinhorn an' a cheat! You used a cold deck last night to beat me. You robbed me of my grubstake, you— Turn around and take it. I'm darin' you to draw."

Ace Dowdy turned. Still he didn't hurry. There was no marked change in the expression of his face. He stood for one brief second, staring at his accuser.

The miner's gun was coming out of leather. Chet Whitaker, frozen in his tracks by this unexpected scene, saw the miner clear the weapon from its holster and raise it toward the waiting gambler. He stood breathless, expecting to see Dowdy crumple before the miner's Colt.

There was a cracking report, followed by a deeper, heavier detonation.

All things seemed to stop for Chet. The breath stemmed in his throat. He saw the miner's arm stop, halfway up, saw the dust spurt by Dowdy's boots as the miner's gun spat. He saw the accusing man sway with an unspeakably stupid look upon his face, and then buckle at the knees and pitch down into the dust.

A puff of acrid blue smoke eddied in front of Ace Dowdy. His right hand, not six inches from his shirt front, held a smoking gun. He had made that draw from a shoulder holster so fast that the kid had barely seen the blurring of his arm.

Dowdy thrust the gun back into leather and walked toward his own saloon. He didn't say a word. The group of men parted to let him pass.

The ferret-eyed Simmons spoke. "That was plain self-defense. The miner went for his weapon first." No one contradicted him. Chet saw Simmons and another man pick up the body and carry it away. A mule team and wagon crunched and rumbled down the main street. Conversation picked up again. The activity of the boom town resumed its course before the bloody dust was trampled and obliterated by the mule teams' hoofs.

Chet Whitaker rode from town with a pinched, crowded feeling in his chest. He was sick, but not in a way he had ever been sick before. He felt as if his vital organs had been frozen into lumps and then pushed upward toward his throat. He had seen a man die. He had seen the fastest draw in

Blackrock Gulch. He knew what men meant when they spoke in fear of the gambler.

His face was still white when he arrived at the camp. It was minutes before he could tell a connected story.

Jerkline Travers spat with his characteristic clicking of the tongue; but Bowers leaned on his shovel and said nothing.

"He's simply pizen with a shoulder gun," Jerkline grunted at last, and that was the end of the comments.

The trio had been a week in Harmonica Gulch when news of a bad nature reached them. They were now no longer alone. Claims had been staked below them in the lower reaches of the gulch, and it was from these newcomers that the word came.

"Pouch robbers," Jerkline explained to his partners, "or so them fellers down the gulch says. They're robbin' the miners plenty in the north diggin's."

SO LONG as the depredations were miles away they did not disturb the labors in Harmonica Gulch. Eventually Bowers went into town, and he returned with a set face.

"They's polecats in this camp it'll take a rope to run out," he declared. "They's nothin' like a rope on a limb to clean up a camp."

He regaled his partners with the news. The pouch robbers were worse. No man dared leave his dust without a guard. Tents were ransacked and belongings rifled while owners were away. The plundering had degenerated to gun robbery and murder. A miner who had turned over a three pound nugget with his spade was later found dead and robbed beside a trail.

There was no competent law enforcement in the town. The citizens had elected a marshal, but he was not competent to deal with the situation; besides, his authority did not extend to the diggings. The county sheriff had so far neglected to install a deputy in the place. The town was wide open and growing worse. There were rumors that honest folks might have to organize vigilance committees.

Jerkline clucked his lips. "Reckon I'll have to give this situation the once over," he declared. "I ain't forgot what we once done in Silver City."

The next day he rode into town. He did not return that night. It was late the next afternoon before he was back at camp.

"The stage was stuck up three miles outa town last night," he announced. "They robbed the express box of fifty pounds of dust. We trailed 'em toward the hills but lost the coyotes. This ain't no bunch of pilferers, it's an organized gang. An' where there's a gang, there's a ramrod at the head of it."

Conditions grew worse. The marshal made investigations, but they resulted in nothing. Masked men held up miners in all sections of the hills. Tents were invaded at night by armed killers. Men who resisted the robbery were shot, but there was no evidence as to the identity of the gangsters.

Jerkline, after another trip to town, came back with portentous news. "There's a mighty rumor that Ace Dowdy is back of this thievin', but there's no one got the nerve to face him with it."

"Then it's got to be vigilantes," vouched Jim Bowers.

Travers made his characteristic cluck. "Vigilantes, hell! A one-man vigilante is what we want—if we could jest get the right man."

"You're right," agreed one of the lower gulchers, "if we jest had him."

That night the Harmonica Gulchers sat around the fire later than usual. The trio had been joined by several of the later arrivals. The men yarned of past adventures in mining towns. Chet played his harmonica. The stars seemed very low that night, hanging in a brilliant canopy over the gulch. The breeze had the soothing touch of a woman's hand. The kid's thoughts were the long long thoughts of youth.

"I shore appreciate you and Jerkline takin' me in," he said to Bowers.

"You two been like dads to me. You see, I ain't got no dad."

That was the most he had ever confided to them.

THE young miner did not fall asleep quickly that night. He heard the heavy breathing of his tent partner like a wheezy discord to the rustling of the willows along the creek. He heard the hum of night noises, the ever-present voices of nature. He heard the gushing ripple of water over stones. And then—

He sat up in his blankets. A sound alien to the common voices of the night struck his ears. Yet, at the beginning, he could not accurately define it. He slipped from his bunk and pulled on his boots. Jim Bowers still slept heavily.

Chet stepped outside the tent. A strange quaking throbbed in his heart. His nerves seemed to draw out, become tenuous, vibrant. His senses were pitched to catch any recurring sounds. Then he was sure. There were men creeping about the camp.

Chet began to move up the gulch. Jerkline's tent was a hundred yards away. He didn't want to call Bowers until he was sure the prowlers were dangerous. Intuition told him they were not men of Harmonica Gulch.

He covered half the distance between the two tents. He had almost persuaded himself that he had made a mistake. He turned to go back, lest Bowers awake and call him a fool.

The blackness of the gulch ahead broke into sound. He heard a sudden call and the tussle of men's bodies. Then a sharp, flat report that echoed hollowly through the night.

Chet remained momentarily frozen. The sounds were unmistakably at Jerkline's tent. A moment of heavy silence followed the shot. Then there was a cursing groan and the crunch of running feet.

Chet started forward. He was running now, regardless of the brush and stones which impeded him. The fifty yards of space stretched to twice that length in his excited imagination. What had happened? Another wrenching groan swept through the valley.

Chet had a fleeting glimpse of a black figure materializing out of the darkness before it collided with him. Then he was down, swept from his feet by the impact of a heavier body. The other was upon him, slugging, kicking. Chet fought with the instinct of a cornered wildcat. He felt the rip of garments in his hands.

He had no sight of the assailant other than a black hulk crowding him. He heard something drop into the dirt with a sodden thud. A heavy fist caught him on the chin and the stars above blurred into a haze.

He got dizzily to his feet; the assailant was gone. He thought he heard a distant crunch of horse hoofs. A light flared as Jim Bowers came up the trail with a lantern. The older man spoke to him and strode onward toward Jerkline's tent.

From farther down the gulch among the newcomers' tents, lights flared and men came running.

They found Jerkline's tent in disorder. The contents of his warbag were thrown upon the ground, his pouch of accumulated gold was gone, and the prospector himself lay sprawled under the tent flap, a great purpling clot upon his shirt.

The lower gulchers were running into the camp now. A tall man named Gusset, who had some knowledge of nursing, immediately took charge. The fire was rebuilt and water heated. Jerkline was still alive, but his pulse was weak.

"If we can just stop the bleeding," Gusset said, but there was no confidence in his tone.

The kid was crowded to the background. A strange anger filled him. Pouch robbers! Killers! And they had escaped while Jerkline lay, his life ebbing with his flowing blood.

IT WAS half an hour before Chet had a chance to talk with Jim Bowers. He told him of the tussle with

the fleeing robber. Then he remembered the fall of something during the fight. Bowers took a lantern and went back along the trail.

Minutes later he returned. His jaw was stiffly set and his eyes glittered. He carried an object in his hand. Chet saw him pass it to Gusset. It was a small, two-barreled derringer, one barrel set above the other—a small but a deadly weapon. The initials "J. D." were engraved on the butt plate.

Gusset examined the derringer. "Ace Dowdy," he stated at last. "His real name's John."

"I was shore of that," agreed Jim. "The low-down killin' skunk. He must carry that holdout weapon along o' his shoulder gun." Words at this moment failed Bowers. He stared around the circle of faces and then hurled the derringer from him. It disappeared under the edge of Jerkline's tent.

"I'm ridin' to Blackrock," he stated hoarsely.

A red-haired miner straightened from beside the fire. "I'll go along," he announced simply.

Bowers gave no indication to Chet. He strode toward the other tent, and the kid could visualize him buckling on his forty-four. In less than five minutes he and the redheaded man had galloped from Harmonica Gulch.

Time dragged. Men talked in whispers beside the fire. Gusset kept a steady watch beside the bunk of Jerkline. A restrained passion kept all the men's voices low.

Once Jerkline burst into speech, but his words were unconnected, meaningless. Once he swore maliciously. Time stretched into one hour and then two since Bowers' departure. Chet was in deep depression. He had an impulse to see Travers once more and stepped into the tent. Gusset stayed him with a gesture of the hand. A ghostly rattle was throbbing in Jerkline's throat. The old prospector sat up, stared about wildly, and fell back with a sudden complete limpness. A minute later, Gusset pulled the blanket over his face.

There was a crunch of hoofs and a man rode into the firelight. His face was pale under his shock of red hair. He dismounted without saying a word and squatted by the fire. A shiver that was not from the cold shook him.

"They ain't no one," he said at last, "who can beat Ace Dowdy with a gun."

The rest of his message he left unsaid. There was no need to say it.

Chet Whitaker stood by Jerkline's bunk. He saw Gusset move out of the tent and join the men by the fire. He heard the low conversations without getting a meaning from the words. An ever-recurrent thought beat his brain. "Jim—Jim Bowers too. Ace Dowdy has killed Jim."

He moved as in a dream. There seemed only an airy connection between his spirit and his body. His mind was groping, centering on a single idea. He saw Jerkline's belt and gun lying beyond the warbag and he buckled them on with wooden fingers.

He had no desire to speak to the others—even to see them again. He lifted the side of the tent and crawled out. His fingers touched the cold metal of the derringer, and he stopped and stared at the weapon thoughtfully.

CHET paused at his own tent. He needed no light. He caught his own horse and saddled it. He did not rush his movements; there was a deliberation uncommon to youth. He felt himself moving toward a definite fate, inevitable as the setting of the sun, and there was no need to hurry. "They ain't no one," the redheaded fellow had said, "who can beat Ace Dowdy with a gun." Chet Whitaker rode through the night with the echo of that thought beating in his brain.

He entered the main street where he had entered it once before—on that fateful morning when the miner had accused Ace Dowdy. As if someone had passed a series of still pictures before his eyes, Chet saw again the

events of the lurid meeting. He saw Ace Dowdy, starting long after the other had gone for his gun, beat his opponent to the kill. "They ain't no one who can beat Ace Dowdy with a gun!"

There was little traffic in the street. The hour was long past midnight. Most of the shops were closed, but the Eldorado was still going full blast. Chet slipped from his horse. He straightened his shoulders, pulled the Colt to an easier position on his thigh, and entered the resort.

The sensation to Chet was that of being engulfed in light. He felt as if the full glare of the lamps was centered on himself. He was surprised that all eyes did not swing in his direction. Apparently his entrance created no stir. Not a man stopped what he was doing to stare at the young miner.

Chet paused within the door, orienting himself to the long room. He saw the men lined along the bar, most of them idly talking. He saw the poker games on the green-topped tables. He saw the faro bank on the far side of the room and his eyes pinned on it.

Tobacco smoke filled the room, rising in blue spirals to settle in gray eddies about the lamps. The faro dealer shuffled the cards in long thin fingers, slipped the deck into the box, and made ready for the first turn. The bets were down. Little cylinders of chips slid to their places on the painted layout. The men along the table were absorbed by the whims of luck. The beads slid along the wires at the case-keeper's touch. Even Simmons, who was acting as lookout, paid no attention to the entrance of Chet.

The kid's gaze narrowed from the long faro table to the man seated at the end of it. This man was placing no bets. His fingers ran nervously up and down a stack of chips, faintly clicking them. His face was the dead white of bleached paper. His black coat was soiled and torn, and there was a smudge on his temple below his lusterless hair.

Chet Whitaker started walking slowly across the room.

Ace Dowdy did not turn. If he were aware of the approaching kid, he gave no evidence of it. His eyes never lost the dead, faraway look. His fingers idled the chips.

"Dowdy!"

The timbre of the voice pulled the gambler around, yet there was no threat in it. His opaque eyes rested on the slender kid. He saw the torn and soiled garments, the drawn and sallow face, the borrowed gun that hung awkwardly—he saw and appraised and discounted the kid as a possible danger. He did not speak, but his look was an invitation to the other to state his wants. The kid took a deep breath and began.

"I told you somethin' once, Dowdy, and I'm tellin' it to you again." The voice was not loud, but it drew the attention of the men. A wave of quiet, starting at the faro table, swept like a palpable current across the room. "I told you that when I got ready to die, I'd come and play this harmonica to you."

Chet took the battered instrument from his pocket.

THE effect on Ace Dowdy was electrical, but there was no violence in his reaction. Yellow glints shot into his eyes like sparks in smoke, and his hand came up to stroke his coat lapel. His body seemed to radiate a potential force that was ready to burst into action.

"Don't play that thing!"

The kid smiled, a smile that would have graced a corpse, so blue were his lips. "I reckon I will." Chet was cupping the instrument now in both hands, holding it not an inch from his chin. "I reckon I will, an' you ain't man enough to stop me. You killed my partners, an' now you can kill me; but I'm playin' one more tune to a murderer an' a robber—"

"What?" Ace Dowdy was on his feet, spinning his chair out of the way.

"You heard me. To the leader of the

pouch robbers an' bandits, the man who murdered Jerkline Travers an' shot my partner, Jim Bowers. To Ace Dowdy, the thief an' killer of Blackrock Gulch, I'm playin' my last tune!"

The kid made no attempt to be theatrical; he was deadly serious. Ace Dowdy's eyes clouded to a dangerous opaqueness.

"Don't play that thing!"

Again the kid smiled, but his skin was like drawn parchment that surely must burst with the least effort. It seemed incredible that those thin blue lips could force a tone, but the first measure rolled like a tocsin through the room.

Ace Dowdy's right hand blurred toward his shoulder holster!

Two men hurriedly entered, and paused just within the doors.

The kid's hands never moved. The harmonica slipped from his fingers, and before it had dropped six inches toward the floor, his cupped hands exploded in an orange and yellow streak of flame. A flat report detonated like the discharge of a cannon in that silent room.

An acrid cloud of powdersmoke floated between the two men. Ace Dowdy staggered and took a step forward into this cloud. His head bowed and his knees buckled. He pitched forward face down, and his unfired gun clattered from limp fingers to the floor.

Chet Whitaker opened his cupped hands. He clutched a double-barreled derringer, a weapon small enough to hide in a man's palm, but deadly at close range. He had held it cupped in his palm when he played that last measure on the harmonica.

He dropped the derringer to the floor beside the shoulder gun. "You can bury it with him," he whispered. "It was his'n." His voice rose, reedy with passion. "Yes, bury it with him. I won't be needin' it. I'm through, Jerkline, I'm through bein' your one-man vigilante." He might have fallen, himself, out of sheer retching sickness had not Gusset and the redheaded man stepped forward and caught him.

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Dead End Trail

By Ney N. Geer

A bushwhacker's bullet was Ed Duane's first warning that an enemy was after his scalp. And that warning flung Duane onto a grim trail that led to a grave for a gunman.

A KEENING wind was sweeping through the Blue Mountains as Ed Duane emerged from the tunnel entrance at noon and paused on the rock dump, buttoning his jacket against the December cold. His long, lanky, work-toughened body was clearly silhouetted against the barren, snow-covered slope as he listened to the round of shots as they exploded one by one with a muffled roar at the working face back inside the tunnel.

Ed was young, only twenty-five, and not such a highly skilled hard rock miner that he could afford to be careless, working here alone. He had to make sure all his shots went off, for he was going back inside after he had cooked and eaten dinner. And if he walked into a delayed blast and was crippled or killed, it would likely be months before anyone passed this way and found him.

He counted four shots, and then there came a shot that Ed Duane

never heard. It was a gunshot, and bullets travel faster than sound. The bullet struck, and Ed Duane dropped into the trampled snow and lay unmoving.

The slug cut a four-inch gash in his scalp and grooved his skull. His lanky, work-toughened body lay face down in an awkward sprawl, with blood trickling down from the gash in his head to form a freezing mat in his untrimmed hair and bushy black beard. Lying there in the trampled snow at the tunnel entrance, Ed Duane looked dead enough to satisfy most any cold-blooded killer bent on murder. That fact no doubt saved him from another shot that would most certainly have put an end to him.

For almost an hour he lay as he had fallen, while the bitter cold seeped into his body and the rising wind drifted the powder snow about him. Had he remained unconscious a little longer, he would certainly have been frozen stiff as a hickory plank. But presently his stunned brain began to clear itself. He was dazedly surprised to find himself down in the snow and slowly freezing.

With great difficulty Duane straightened his arms and lifted his head. His head was humming like a molasses barrel infested with buzzing hornets, and it ached as if all the hornets had used their stingers at once. With a painful effort that taxed every shred of his willpower, he succeeded in hoisting his two-hundred-pound frame to his feet and for a time gazed wonderingly about, trying to figure out what had happened.

AT FIRST Duane thought a piece of rock had come whizzing out of the tunnel and batted him on the head. Then he realized that, with two sharp angles in the tunnel, it would be utterly impossible for his blasts to hurl any rock this far out from the working face inside. At least, it had never happened before.

Then he saw the fuzzy rent in his pit cap and his steel-gray eyes narrowed with anger. Only a bullet was likely to cut such a rent as that. He picked up his canvas cap and his lips drew tight as he examined it closer. Someone had tried to bushwhack him!

But why? That was a question that puzzled Ed Duane as he stomped the circulation back into his feet and legs and made his way down the bleak slope to his cabin in a clump of pines. As far as Ed knew, he didn't have an enemy in this world, for both he and his brother had always been strictly careful to mind their own business. They had learned that lesson very young.

Ed had only a dim recollection of his mother, and his father had died of tick fever when Ed was only thirteen years old. Jim, his brother, was two years older. Thrown upon their own resources, they had been forced to turn their hands to various means of making a living; trapping in season, gentling broncs and working cattle, day laborers on construction jobs, any and every way they could earn an honest dollar. Ingrained honesty had kept them out of trouble and earned them many friends. To be bushwhacked was a new experience for Ed Duane. His temper waxed hotter as he tried to puzzle out the motive that lay behind the cowardly crime.

There were fresh boot and horse tracks around his cabin, Ed discovered. His own rifle had been used by the would-be killer to plug him with, for there was a spent shell in its chamber. Nothing inside the cabin seemed to be disturbed, except that the unknown visitor had cooked and eaten a meal, leaving his dirty dishes unwashed, which in itself violated the code of Western hospitality, and angered Ed Duane still more.

Had the visitor attempted to murder him with robbery as a motive, thinking he had gold hidden somewhere about? Evidently not, else the cabin would have been ransacked.

It was generally known that this little mine Ed was now working pro-

duced nothing but ore that had to be shipped to a smelter. The mine was not free-milling nor rich enough to tempt anyone to jump this claim. An aged and ailing miner had formerly owned and worked it. Ed and Jim had become acquainted with him while trapping this section.

They had befriended and cared for the old miner, who in turn had taught them the rudiments of mining and sold them his claims. Their filing had been properly and legally recorded, before the old miner had died in a hospital where they had placed him. No one could have any grudge on that score.

For two years, Ed and Jim had worked the mine together. The vein had widened and become somewhat richer. They had taken out a kidney of rather high-grade ore, which netted them thirty thousand dollars. Like most men who have ever worked cattle for wages, their main ambition was to own a sizable cattle spread, well stocked with high-grade Herefords and a good strain of palomino saddle horses.

With that joint object in mind, Jim Duane had set out for southern Nevada to buy the very spread they had in view. Ed had stayed on here at the mine, working it single-handed to furnish additional money to keep the ranch going until it would begin to show a profit. Ed had been alone here almost two years. Everyone who knew him understood that he kept no money around, but sent it to his brother whenever he made a shipment of ore.

ED NEVER doubted the honesty of his brother as he tried to figure out why the unknown bushwhacker had tried to kill him. With the keen eye of a trapper, he carefully studied the tracks about his cabin. The tracks led off southward.

It was going to be a difficult trail to follow, Ed knew, for already the tracks were filling with wind-blown snow. But follow it he must, for the killer believed him dead, and if he learned that his shot had failed in its dastardly work, the man would surely return and make another attempt at murder. Ed fully realized that his life depended on learning the identity of this man who had cunningly skulked up on him and fired that shot.

Stopping only to wash the blood from his head and don his warmest clothes, Ed Duane took the outgoing trail afoot, following it with the skill and patience of a hunting wolf. He camped where dark overtook him. Next day long stretches of the trail were blotted out by wind and shifting snow. It swung wide of the ranch where Ed's horses were being wintered. There Ed picked up his best mount and took to the saddle, following his man south across the Oregon high desert into Nevada.

By now the tracks of the man's horse had long since vanished from the range. But, even though Ed asked but few casual questions, he was picking up a scrap of information here and there. The ambusher was a nondescript cowpuncher of average size and build. About his only mark of identification was a long thin scar on the side of his face that pulled the left corner of his mouth upward in a perpetual one-sided smile.

At Winnemucca, Ed struck up a desultory conversation with a barkeeper and learned that his scar-faced man had been accosted at the bar by an acquaintance who hailed him as "Smiling Sam."

The ambusher was getting back on his home range, it seemed. Why had he ridden in mid-winter hundreds of miles into another state to murder a lone miner? Ed Duane pondered that question keenly.

From here the trail turned sharply eastward and ran through Emigrant Pass to Elko. At this point Ed discovered that Smiling Sam had swapped horses and headed south toward Ely. However, when he had been traveling three days in that direction. Ed could find no trace of his man and realized that he was at fault. Smiling Sam had not come this way, but must have

abruptly turned off in some other direction.

Did the ambusher realize that he was being trailed from the scene of his attempted murder? Did he know by now that his shot had failed to do its intended work? Ed had no way of knowing. But here was further proof that the man he followed was a mighty careful and sagacious fellow. He might even be laying in wait somewhere along his trail, fully prepared to put another slug into the man who followed him.

Ed Duane fully realized this danger, but grimly continued his hunt. At an outlying ranch he traded horses, and the next day whacked off his beard along the trail back to Elko. There he got a close haircut and shave, and next day left town headed west.

By the time he arrived at Battle Mountain, Ed's hair was no longer black, but had changed to a light golden-brown. He was matching guile with guile. Formerly bearded to the eyes, Ed doubted if his own brother would now recognize him at a casual glance, and certainly Smiling Sam would find it hard to do so, for the scar-faced ambusher had in all probability never had a close look at him.

VALUABLE time was lost before Ed learned that his man had struck south from Battle Mountain. The side trip to Elko had been only a dodge. By now it was late January. The trail was growing cold and hard to follow.

He learned that Smiling Sam had been in Austin a couple of days, then passed on, but in which direction no one knew. By now Ed was running short of money. He sold his rifle and continued south toward Tonopah. At Round Mountain, a hostler remembered that a scar-faced puncher had left his horse in the livery over night, then had taken the south trail next morning. Ed pushed on. His mount suddenly went lame and it was limping badly by the time he nursed it slowly into Tonopah.

Here roads and trails ran outward in every direction like spokes from a wheel. A careful search revealed that Smiling Sam was not in town, but which trail had he taken? By now Ed was out of funds again. He found a job in a freight shed and worked two weeks.

He would have written his brother, explained the situation and asked for Jim to send him money, but for one fact. The trail of this elusive ambusher he followed seemed to lead straight from the Blue Mountains in Oregon toward Sage City in southern Nevada, and the Bar Q Ranch, which Ed and Jim Duane owned jointly. Or did they own it jointly, Ed asked himself, for he was beginning to wonder. Dark and brooding thoughts were forcing their way into his mind.

Could it possibly be that Jim, his own brother, had grown grasping and greedy, had lost all sense of fair play? Had he sent a killer up to their little mine for the express purpose of doing away with him, his younger brother, so that he, Jim Duane, could have the Bar Q Ranch they'd both worked and saved for, all to himself? Yes, Ed Duane knew some bitter and gloomy thoughts. He tried to fight them down. Was he cracking under the strain of this long, hard trail, he asked himself. Jim was four-square!

But Ed was remembering that Jim's letters had been short and sketchy, not very informative at best. And since the previous summer Jim had not written any letters, only a couple of brief cards, hurriedly scrawled, asking how the mine was coming. Ed smiled bitterly, as he rode the trail to Sage City. To those cards he had replied by letter and in detail, explaining how the ore vein seemed to be entirely pinching out and it looked as if the mine were about finished.

"What a mistake to write that!" Ed mused darkly. "That's why I got a slug bounced off my skull. Jim reckoned I was no further use to him, I reckon."

It was a somber and moody man

who stepped into the sheriff's office in Sage City the following day. Ed Duane had changed. Bitterness lay like bold print stamped across his young face and his steel-gray eyes were full of it, easy for the sheriff to read at a glance.

A black-handled six-shooter hung low on Ed's hip, but the habits of a lifetime are hard to break. Ed had always been law-abiding and orderly. He had just located Smiling Sam in a nearby saloon, and now was laying his case before the local sheriff before he messed around. Ed Duane wanted things straight and aboveboard.

"SET down, son," the sheriff said, and motioned to an open box of cigars on his battered desk. "It's plain to see that something serious is eating on you. Have a smoke, and get it off your chest." Mark Whitman was calm of face, serious of eye, but not so harried by the duties of his office but what he could occasionally smile. And now he smiled quizzically at his visitor. "There's nothing so bad it couldn't be worse," he added.

"You may be right, sheriff," Ed replied slowly. He was intently studying Mark Whitman's honest face and friendly blue eyes. He at once decided he liked Whitman and could trust him. He took a cigar from the box, carefully bit off its end and lighted it. "I'm Ed Duane from up Oregon way," he stated frankly, and took a chair beside the sheriff's desk.

A baffling expression crossed Mark Whitman's leathery face. "That's interesting," he replied, and got to his feet. He moved across the office and forthwith closed his door opening into a long hall of the county building. As he recrossed the room, the sheriff adjusted his gun holster more to his liking, then resumed his seat. "I already know one Ed Duane from up Oregon way," he stated thinly, and his eyes had narrowed with suspicion.

The words took Ed completely by surprise. His jaw dropped a little. "What do you mean by that?" he asked tightly.

"Exactly what I said," Whitman rejoined. "When you said that you're Ed Duane, do you mean that you're Jim Duane's brother?"

"I sure do, sheriff!"

"Then how many brothers did Jim Duane have?"

"I'm the only one there is," Ed answered uneasily, struck by a sudden fear.

"You got anything by which to identify yourself?" Whitman demanded, eyeing Ed intently. "Any letters, papers or documents? Does anyone know you around here?"

Ed slowly shook his head, for in his haste to take the trail of the man who had attempted to murder him he had never dreamed such a need for them as this might arise. In fact, he had not even thought to open the cigar box in which he kept his letters, and his statements from the smelter.

The sheriff, with the fingers of his left hand, drummed noisily on his desk. "Mighty interesting, son," he remarked in a level voice. "This other Ed Duane has already proved his identity months ago, and is now in full charge of the Bar Q Ranch."

"Where's Jim Duane?" Ed asked sharply, a smothering feeling in his chest.

"Jim Duane died last summer from one of his heart attacks."

"Dead!" Ed gasped. "From a heart attack! Thunderation! Jim never had anything wrong with his heart. If he's dead, then he was murdered!" Ed felt suddenly sick. Sick with self-loathing because he had even doubted his brother's honesty for a single moment. Full realization of his great loss would come later, hitting Ed harder and harder as time passed. They had been mighty close, Ed and Jim. Closer than most brothers.

"Doc Fost didn't call it murder," the sheriff said kindly, becoming aware of Ed's mental suffering. "There wasn't a mark on Jim Duane, he said. Doc thought at first it might be ptomaine poisoning from something he et, and pumped out his stomach to make sure.

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But Jim's stomach didn't have a thing in it but coffee. Just black coffee! Doc sent it off and had it analyzed to make sure. There wasn't a trace of poison in it. Doc is quite positive Jim Duane died of an acute heart attack. I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree, son."

"No, sheriff," Ed replied stubbornly, "I'm positive Jim was murdered, one way or another. Take a look at this bullet gash in my scalp. Smiling Sam Dykster put that there up in the Blue Mountains last December, a-tryin' to kill me. And he thinks he did, I reckon." In full detail Ed told his story.

MARK WHITMAN bit hard on his cigar. His cigar went dead and cold as he listened. "Somehow I'm rather inclined to believe you, son," he said musingly, when Ed had finished. "But as I see it, you haven't a shred of evidence to support your story in court. If what you say is true, then Smiling Sam must have rifled your cabin of your letters and papers, then mailed them down to this bogus Ed Duane. He submitted them as identifying evidence to the judge in probate court the latter part of December.

"True, Smiling Sam Dykster may have been away in Oregon about that time, as I can't remember having seen him around here then. But he was at the Bar Q last summer, working there, at the time Jim Duane died. It was Sam Dykster who informed Doc Fost about Jim's heart attacks."

"Don't that add up to something?" Ed asked dryly. "Jim and I have put thousands of dollars into that Bar Q spread. We trapped it once—wolves and coyotes—and decided to buy it sometime. Don't you reckon a couple of drygulchers would figure it was worth a couple of murders, if they saw a chance to get away with it?"

"Sure it adds up," Whitman replied seriously. "But where's your evidence? The other Ed Duane is well established here. It might take you years to prove he's an impostor. Why, he might prove you're one. You might even be found dead with a bullet in you, if you start messing around. I can't keep an eye on you all the time. The fact is, this other Ed Duane shows more family resemblance to Jim Duane than you do.

"If you've always worn a beard, even your closest friends would hesitate to swear to your identity, now you have a smooth face and have changed the color of your hair. Far as I know, this Sam Dykster has a pretty fair reputation around here. See what you're up against, son?"

"Sure, I see," Ed replied with controlled anger. "The deck is stacked, the deal is made, the Bar Q ranch is in the jackpot, and I don't even hold openers, it seems. But I've tracked Smiling Sam a good long ways, sheriff, and this is going to be a dead end trail for one of us. That's certain!"

Mark Whitman was deeply troubled. "Don't go out and do anything hasty, son," he cautioned. "Don't prove you're a half-wit by getting mixed up in a gunplay. Be smart about this! I like you, son. Danged if I don't. Let's play this out together. Let's hold our cards close to our vest. Remember, there's a joker in every deck."

"I don't aim to do anything hasty," Ed answered. "Did you know Jim well? How many times did you see him?"

"Three-four times," the sheriff said, thinking back. "First time was when he was here in the county building to have his deed recorded, a joint deed, as I remember. That's what makes it easy for this other Ed Duane to take over the Bar Q. Second time was when Jim was in to collect bounty on a good bunch of coyotes and wolves he'd pelted. He sure cleaned them out on the Bar Q. Quite a wolfer, Jim was.

"And I saw him time he brought a bunch of palominos in from California. Right pretty, them hosses, mostly mares. And I stopped with Jim one night at the ranch, maybe a year ago. We had quite a visit that night. He

talked considerable about his kid brother, and how the two of you was roughing out a bunch of broncs when you was kids and you tackled a zebra dun that piled you nine times in a row and then jumped in your middle with all four feet. But the tenth time you stuck to the hurricane deck."

"It wasn't a zebra dun," Ed Duane said huskily. "It was a wall-eyed, bald-faced sorrel with a Roman nose. He only piled me five times, as I remember. And he didn't jump in my middle. The ornery snake belted me in the pants with both hind feet so hard I ate supper standing up. It was Jim who took him on from there and rode the kinks out of him. He sure handled that bronc rough!"

WHITMAN'S blue eyes brightened in a pleased way. He had mixed up the details of the account intentionally. In setting him right, Ed Duane had proved his identity, at least to the sheriff's satisfaction.

"Lay low and keep out of trouble, Ed," he said. "Give me time to do some quiet investigating. I'm for you, strong!"

"Fair enough," Ed said quietly. "If it's evidence you want, I'll dig you up some. I don't aim to have my brother murdered, our ranch stolen, and take it laying down. What I mean is, I aim to trap me some human wolves. When I'm ready to pelt 'em, I'll let you know the time and place, so you can be there when I spring my trap. It won't be long either. When I send for you, bring Doc Fost along. And be sure to wear your guns! A trap is likely to snap both ways, sheriff."

"I'll be there, son," Whitman agreed. "But don't try anything foolish. You're up against a slick pair of crooks, judging by all the signs."

As Duane went out into Sage City's main street, he drew a listless, half-stupid expression over his long, hard-muscled face, and succeeded in good measure in dulling the natural keenness of his steel-gray eyes. Bright things attract attention, he knew. Only dull and tarnished objects pass unnoticed.

This cowtown was like a hundred others he had known, save that it was growing faster than most, for it was drawing trade from miners in the high hills that stood vaguely against the leaden sky of this bleak early spring day.

Also the town profited by a temporary influx of spenders from construction crews working on the new railroad. Its fresh grade was a long straight line running through this wide and level valley. The road would greatly enhance the value of the Bar Q ranch, thirty miles up valley with abundant summer range back in those cedar-stippled hills.

Even now sturdy calves would be dropping out at the Bar Q. Young colts would be frisking beside their palomino mothers. Somewhere near and above them, a trim-legged stallion was standing on lookout, neck proudly arched, cream-colored mane and tail riffling in the wind. Before Ed's eyes that picture formed clear-sharp and vivid, keening his hunger for the free and open range. Now the loss of Jim, his pard and brother, knifed him through the heart. Temper's full tide flooded his whole being.

A nearby saloon's doors swung outward and a piano's tinny tones poured into the street. A tall, dark-complexioned man about Ed's age and build came stepping arrogantly out, closely followed by Sam Dykster, whose scar-faced, perpetual one-sided smile was a satisfied leer.

Sight of them brought to Ed Duane remembrance of those two scrawled post cards, the letter and money he had sent in reply to them even at the time Jim was dead. That tall, self-satisfied companion of Dykster's was the impostor, Ed realized, and indignant anger shook him like a tempest.

DUANE fought down an unreasoning impulse to call out a challenge, then draw and use his gun in a hell-roaring showdown. Slouched

against a porch post, he turned his eyes downward to the puddled drip of rain from the board awning overhead. His work-thickened fingers busied themselves with shaping up a cigarette, while his jaw muscles lumped and stood out rigidly on his smooth-shaven face.

Ed Duane, the impostor, carelessly elbowed his arm in passing. He casually turned his head for a brief appraisal, saw the flake tobacco sift downward, the paper flutter after it like a wind-blown leaf. Then he laughed shortly and just as carelessly passed on along his well-liquored way.

The true Ed Duane rigidly held his pose, head tipped listlessly downward toward the street. It was the pose of a man whom adversity has whipped and beaten to his knees. But his nostrils were dilated like those of a free-ranging stallion that sights a challenging rival. Sam Dykster looked back briefly, but with little interest. Then the two of them entered another saloon, forgetting the trifling incident.

Ed Duane put his face into the slow drive of the mist-laden wind. It cooled the burning fire of his temper. It carried the invigorating smells of rain-washed sage and cedar and greening grass into his scent-keen nostrils. Those things sharpened his range hunger. They were good clean odors with a pleasing tang. They renewed the deep wells of a man's courage.

And courage feeds the fountain springs of a man's perpetual hope—hope for better things to come and the driving will to live out an uncertain future. It was a raw and chilling wind. But it brushed the mental cobwebs from Ed's brain, swept the temper-dullness from it. And now a full and

sagacious plan of action sprang newborn into his mind.

It was a plan that involved a high degree of danger to himself, instant death perhaps. Success would hinge in part on Doc Fost and Sheriff Whitman, together with Ed's own insight into human character and his ability to act well his part and spring his trap with exact timing.

Had he judged Mark Whitman correctly? Could he trust the sheriff's gun skill, his ability to draw and shoot in a split-second pinch? Ed smiled thinly, for it was a life or death risk he had already decided to take.

Then his brittle-hard smile faded

into an expression of almost stupid dullness. He turned and, with an assumed heavy-footed shuffle, scuffed dejectedly along the plank walk. Outwardly he was a stumble bum, inwardly as keen and bright as a newly cut and polished diamond; morally straight and physically hard. Whitman was the sheriff. Well, Whitman could do the shooting!

BEING resolved upon this, Ed turned heavily about and entered the first saloon, where he tried without success to bum a free drink. Failing in this, he tried the next drinking place.

Ed was still trying to bum a drink when he entered the saloon where Dykster and his companion were drinking. Smiling Sam Dykster and the impostor were laughing and joking with the barkeep. Ed shuffled in and paused at the bar near the door. The very servility and hopelessness of his demeanor, as he broached the subject of free drinks, strongly irked the barkeep, whose refusal was blunt and loudly spoken.

"We don't cater to stumble bums," he said. "If you're broke, why don't you hock your gun?"

With a show of reluctance and a half-hearted attempt to haggle over the transaction, Ed passed his belt, holster and Colt over the bar in exchange for two drinks and a few dollars to eat on. The barkeep had a witty tongue, and Smiling Sam and the tall, dark-haired impostor listened to the transaction with amused interest, putting in a few caustic comments themselves.

Ed took his two drinks, then moodily studied the money in his hand. Presently he turned toward the door, then hesitated and faced about. In the room's rear several small-stake poker games were in progress. Ed's expression brightened, became hopeful.

The rattle of poker chips appeared to draw him irresistibly, like a bit of scrap metal to a magnet. He took a slow step or two, then his pace quickened as he neared the tables, where he slid into a vacant chair and bought chips with all his money. The fourth hand played, a young puncher of not over twenty drew Ed into a pot and cleaned him out on a bluff.

"Go get a job on the grade," the puncher bantered. "When you get a payday, come back and I'll teach you the game."

Ed Duane, an expert poker player, shrugged resignedly, got silently up from the table and shuffled from the saloon. He had put on a good act, and it was convincing. From here on, he could easily pass as a bum in this town.

Loafing on the street, he watched where Smiling Sam and the impostor went to eat. When they had eaten and departed, Ed entered the place and bummed the Chinaman for a meal, being required to wash a slew of dishes in exchange. And the wily Oriental owner of the restaurant saw to it that Ed washed the dishes first, before a meal was provided.

Ed did such a good and painstaking job, however, that the Chinaman was pleased. Ed had broken no dishes, and the kindly Oriental suggested he return next morning for breakfast, which Ed did, washing more dirty dishes and putting his hand to some odd jobs about the kitchen.

There was hayseed on his clothes, for he had bummed a place to sleep in the livery. That day he sold his limping mount, together with his much-used saddle, to the liveryman for a little cash. Returning to the same saloon where he had gambled, Ed bought some drinks, tried a whirl at poker, with the same result as before.

THIS time, however, Ed picked a table where Sam and the impostor both happened to be playing, and it was the tall, dark-complexioned impostor who casually bluffed Ed out of a sizable pot and took his last chip. Both men laughed as Ed dejectedly left the game.

"Feller," the impostor remarked

cuttingly, "you lack the nerve to win at poker. Go south and get a job choppin' cotton."

Ed silently trudged to the bar, where he eyed the barman half hopefully. The barman shook his head in refusal.

"Hombre," he said so that all could hear, "this isn't no charity institution. When you can't pay your way, stay out of here." He said it with cold finality, for he had read the signs and was satisfied that Ed, whoever he was, had hit the bottom and was on the rocks. Ed shrugged ruefully and shuffled outside, smiling inwardly, for he had no further business here.

Ed forthwith returned to the Chinaman's place and soon became a fixture there. The Chinaman was running the restaurant with white help, and when the cook went on a bender three days later, the harried Oriental pressed Ed into service and was delighted to discover Ed could well handle the job and much more to his liking. He put Ed into white pants and shirt, stuck a white cap on his head and said, beaming brightly, "You my cookee! You no drinkee, we get along velly well."

Even the patrons noticed that the cooking was improved, the food seasoned more to their taste. In fact, even Smiling Sam and the impostor, who ate here regularly, being in town most of the time, voiced pleased comments to the Chinaman, who beamed his thanks.

But Sheriff Mark Whitman, who casually took to patronizing the place, in company with Doc Fost, offered no comment. He was mentally alert to the fact that Ed Duane had already set his trap and baited it. But as to how and when the trap would close, Whitman had no idea. However, he correctly judged it would be soon, for the bogus Ed Duane was dickering to sell the Bar Q ranch.

Ed, who had carefully observed the eating habits of the two men he was after, sprang his trap one morning while they were in for their usual breakfast of ham and eggs, cakes and coffee. At sight of them through the serving window, Ed dispatched the waitress out the back door after the sheriff and doctor, with instruction to hurry, then stay clear of the place.

The girl followed his instructions to the letter. Ed served Smiling Sam and the impostor their coffee himself, a cup of which they always drank black

before eating. They were not surprised nor suspicious at Ed serving them, having become accustomed to seeing him around. They gave him their breakfast order, drank their coffee, and waited, meanwhile passing the time of day with Sheriff Whitman and Doc Fost as those two entered and took seats at a nearby table.

It so happened that, Ed having picked his time, the four men were the only patrons in the dining room, save for the Chinaman, who was at the cash drawer near the door. Ed Duane came from the kitchen and stopped before Dykster and the impostor.

"Did you gents notice anything wrong with your coffee?" Ed asked casually.

"Sure not!" Smiling Sam exclaimed. "If we had, we wouldn't have drunk it."

Ed Duane smiled thinly. "I reckon Jim Duane thought the same thing," he remarked, and in his hand was a small glass bottle partly full of fine, white powder. He held it in full view, between his thumb and first finger, tipping it slowly one way then another, so that the contents of the bottle changed ends like sand running through an hour glass.

FOR an instant, the two men sat as if stunned, while their faces filled with fear and their eyes bulged with horror.

"Strychnine!" Dykster gasped in panic. "The tasteless kind! Damn you, Blacky, I warned you to ditch that bottle. It's Ed Duane! He's poisoned us!"

The bogus owner of the Bar Q ranch came to his feet, hands clutching at his middle like bird claws. "The pump, Doc!" he cried urgently at Doc Fost. "Quick! Pump our stomachs out. We're poisoned!"

Doc Fost was a quiet little man, not easily rattled. "I'm sorry, gentlemen," he said politely, "but I haven't my stomach pump along. I rarely find use for it. Anyway, you'll both be dead by the time I could fetch my pump. You know how suddenly strychnine hits. Especially that powdered kind! It was Jim Duane's blood I should have sent away to be tested. It becomes evident that you two rascals used a pump on him, several times no doubt, then left his stomach full of unpoisoned coffee. I feel sure a postmortem will prove it."

Sheriff Whitman remained watchful and silent, his eyes fixed on Ed's lean face. He knew that Ed was unarmed. He thought grimly, "The vengeful fool! His poison has cheated the rope, unless it's his own neck that it stretches. The fool! Why did he do it?"

Ed Duane said calmly, speaking to all: "It's a quick killer for coyotes and wolves. Jim and I frequently used it, when conditions were right. Jim fetched our bottle down from the mine, used some to clean out the varmints on the Bar Q, I reckon. Only this ain't the same bottle Jim had. I reckoned these two-legged varmints ditched that. So I got me another bottle that looks just the same.

"It looks just the same, but I could swallow all this and live happy. Sugar catches flies. This is the powdered kind. I was only bluffing you gents! Now where's your nerve?" He stood there unarmed, smiling his brittle-hard smile.

That smile baited Sam Dykster and his murderous companion into a raging fury of frustration. It was not a strychnine fit they had. It was a fit of unreasoning, uncalculating passion that struck them both at once. Their faces swelled, went livid with murderous rage and hate.

Like one man, both of them slapped hands to their guns, whipping them upward and out. In the eyes of each was the fierce gleam that marked them as killers.

Ed Duane glanced toward Mark Whitman, the man he was trusting. The sheriff who represented the law. Would Mark fail him?

Mark Whitman was caught in a fight for time. Mark was a mighty

fast gunman. But now he was caught flat-footed at the start, for somehow he had failed to grasp the full trickery of Ed's cunning and sagacious trap, which was nothing short of a dead-fall. It had taken steel-nerved daring to risk it. Ed was facing two killers unarmed.

The Chinaman ducked behind his cigar case. Doc Fost shrank back in his chair, admiring Ed's calmness and smile. This gunplay was split-second fast! Doc knew that men would suddenly die here, and sucked in his breath with a gasp.

The sheriff, with no time to kick back his chair and spring to his feet, drew as he sat, picking his easiest gun to handle, hammer-fanned it across the table.

Whitman's shots rocked the room in a crashing roll of gun thunder. The muzzle of his single-action Colt spouted a sheet of spurting flame. His deadly slugs pounded and smashed at his targets. Mark was desperately striving to beat down the two raging murderers before they could line their guns on Ed Duane. And it was, Mark realized, his own gun that was cheating the rope.

The thought put a grim sort of smile on his tight lips even as his left hand fanned his gun hammer and his right hand directed its fire. He felt no remorse as the two cold-blooded murderers staggered, were shaken by the impact of his lead. Then they went down lifeless with their guns, harmlessly fired, still clutched in their twitching hands.

Ed Duane's voice broke the awesome hush that followed. His words sounded almost casual. "Thank you, Mark. I told you it would be a dead end trail for someone."

The Oriental showed his head above the cigar case, seemingly not greatly disturbed. Doc Fost got up from his chair and began his professional duty of examining the bodies, showing little excitement.

Mark Whitman said to Ed half angrily, "Drat you, Ed! You tricked me into this shooting. I would have planned this showdown differently! But maybe it's just as well this way after all. I've got to give you credit for being a versatile hombre. Furthermore, I still like you. Strong!"

"Yes," Doc Fost agreed, "I think he'll make a fit owner for the Bar Q spread."

The Chinaman nodded vigorously. "Yes, I velly much sink so. But who cookee here now?"

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County. I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do if there is poverty unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 42, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1939, Frank B. Robinson.

Renegade from the

After drygulch guns targeted him, Marshal Buck Rowley found himself wearing a desperado's duds, toting strange sixes, and riding another cayuse. And back from the grave came Rowley to get his man—only to have to line his sights on a whole band of the owlhoot brotherhood.

Badlands

Big
Outlaw Novelette

By Galen C. Colin

CHAPTER I

THE man who crouched behind the clump of juniper on the rim of the rock bench did not have to move. He had planned it all carefully—planned it with the cunning of a man with a price on his head. He had skulked through a hundred miles of badlands just to reach this spot at the right moment.

Now with this moment at hand, he was as deadly cold and nerveless as the rocks on which he lay. Everything had worked out just as he had hoped it would—just as he knew it would. A twisted smile, tinged with warped pride played across his lips.

The tawny-haired man below had dropped down the steep cut-bank, neck-reining his rangy roan with careless ease along the narrow trail. He pulled to a halt at the edge of the tumbling mountain stream. He swung one long leg around the saddle horn, while he fumbled in his pocket for tobacco and papers.

The man on the bench above dropped the muzzle of his rifle no more than an inch. That was how close he had guessed. Just a fraction to the left—then the slow, steady squeeze of the trigger. A sharp crack—a faint wisp of gray smoke eddying up from the rifle muzzle.

For just a second it seemed that the bullet had missed. The man on the horse did not move. Even his hands, in the process of rolling a quirley, froze. Then slowly, like a puppet on the end of a thread, he teetered forward—backward in his saddle. His hands dropped jerkily. Slowly, awkwardly he toppled sideways. For a breath the rowel on his right heel caught on the saddle horn.

The man above did not move. His cheek still cuddled the stock of his rifle as he watched. The smile was cold and set. His finger was stiff as it crooked around the trigger. He did not breathe until that rowel came free—until the tawny-haired man plunged to the ground. Then his breath came explosively.

He backed away from the rim of the bench—got to his knees. For a full three minutes he did not change that posture. The roan horse down below had surged forward as its rider tumbled from the saddle. But only for a few yards. Now it was nipping at the young leaves on the brush that bordered the stream.

AT LAST the killer drew a long breath—grunted in grim satisfaction. He got to his feet. A fleeting expression of surprise crossed his stubbled face at the stiffness in his joints from holding one position such a long time. He backed away from the rim to where his own horse, a hammer-headed bay, was ground anchored out of sight of the trail.

He thrust the rifle in its scabbard beneath the saddle skirt. He swung up and thrust his feet into the stirrups. Gathering up the reins, he touched the animal with star-roweled heel. A circuitous path brought him to the trail above the cut-bank. He neck-reined into it.

The roan horse with the empty saddle tossed its head in momentary fright, and moved a little farther along the bank of the stream as the strange horse and rider dropped down the steep trail. The killer pulled his bay to a stop beside the prone body, and slid from his saddle.

For a long moment he stood looking down at the sprawled form. This was the closest he had ever been to the tawny-haired man—but he was not disappointed. The man was about his own size and build. Perhaps a trifle taller—not quite so stocky. Same shock of golden-glinted hair. Same shape of face—broad forehead, high cheekbones, straight mouth and square chin. Not his double by any means, but close enough.

He hunkered beside the body. As swiftly and surely as if he had rehearsed it, he stripped the calfskin jacket, the bull-hide chaps, the blue

flannel shirt and the worn levis from the body. He straightened—looked down at the man, clad now only in underclothes and boots. That twisted smile played across his lips again.

"You look enough like me," he grunted. "When the buzzards and coyotes finish with you, nobody can tell the difference. Wish I could collect the reward, but—"

His words broke off short. He drew a sharp breath and a shiver chased itself up and down his spine. For those cold lips had moved—a sound halfway between a groan and a word came from them. The killer's right hand darted to the holster at his hip. The six-gun slithered from the leather.

"Not—dead—huh?"

The muzzle swung up—the gun bellowed sullenly. A round black hole appeared in the gray undershirt, just above the prone man's heart. He twitched once—lay still. The killer dropped to his knees and examined the first wound. The rifle bullet had grazed the man's skull—probably deep enough to have killed him in time. The last bullet had made certain.

Grunting with satisfaction, the bushwhacker finished his task. He stripped himself down, and donned the dead man's clothes. Then, awkwardly but swiftly, he dressed the body in his own cast-off apparel. A little twinge twisted his lips at parting with those things that he had spent months in making known—at making his own trademark—through the whole range.

Black, flat-crowned Stetson with its snakeskin band and silver concha, red silk shirt, soft doeskin vest with intricate stitching, black broadcloth pants with tight-fitting legs thrust into boot-tops. And last of all, the curious gold ring, thick and heavy, fashioned in the shape of a snake with ruby eyes.

He stood above the body for a last swift examination. Everything looked all right. The *wanted* circular in the pocket to establish identity, if the ring and the clothing failed. Now he searched the pockets of the clothing he wore. A twisted grin of satisfaction split his face.

He backed toward the roan horse. The animal snorted, but allowed him to grasp the reins. He swung into the saddle—neck-reined the roan toward the motionless body. For an instant his gaze swung to the hammer-headed bay. It hurt a little to part from that animal—the only horse he had ever owned with a disposition to match his own. Then his eyes dropped to the man on the ground. He lifted his hand in mock salute.

"You look enough like me to pass, feller. Thanks for that—an' everything. So long, Caddo Seiler!"

Suddenly, as if anxious to be gone, he set rowels in the roan's ribs. The animal jacknifed up the steep cut bank. For a quarter of a mile the man kept it to the trail. Then he neck reined to the left, and headed southwest into the tumbled badlands.

"Give the buzzards an' coyotes a couple o' days," he muttered. "Then we'll head for Grinnel. The reward's too good to pass up."

As he rode, he tested the draw and feel of the strange six-guns at his thighs and found them good. Perfect balance—hair-trigger action—guns that were made for swift, sure use. As good a pair as his own, now buckled around the waist of the man back in the ravine. The distorted grin came to his lips again. Once more he had outwitted the law that had set a price on his head. Once more he had escaped the wrath of his own outfit which he feared even more than the law.

"Only thing now is to get used to bein' called 'Buck Rowley'," he grunted.

MAVIS NOLAN heard, but hardly noticed the first shot. It was only a thin, far-off crack. Her thoughts were far away—two thousand miles away. Every day since she had come from the East to make her home with her brother, Dennis Nolan,

on the little spread he was building up, she had ridden out to this rock.

She sat on its flat top, hands clasped over her buckskin-skirted knees. The wind ruffled her chestnut hair. Its tang heightened the color in her cheeks, gave a sparkle to her Irish blue eyes. From this spot she could see for a dozen miles across the tumbled, tangled country that spilled down from the mountains behind to the rolling plains off to the east.

It was a lonesome country—to a girl who had spent her nineteen years in a part of the East where there was a home and family on every quarter section. A lonesome country, but one which was wrapping her slowly in its invisible chains of enchantment. It made her feel so small, yet so important—like the only person in the whole world.

That first shot did not bring her from that almost dreamy reverie—from the distant, now almost forgotten memories. But the second, coming a few minutes later, was more insistent. A hoarser, more menacing sound—the deeper bellow of a six-gun. Her red lips parted and her blue eyes widened. Her hands still clasped around her knees, but her back straightened and her chin tilted up.

There was no mistaking this sound—and it should not have been. For miles behind her there should have been no one to shoot—no reason for shooting. No other spread between here and Grinnel—only a single seldom-used trail. Couldn't be Dennis, for he had ridden north that morning, with the intention of combing the ravines and brush for strays.

For a full minute she did not move, but her ears were strained for the repetition of that shot. A dozen reasons for it swirled through her mind. Dennis had told her much of the range, both in letters and by word since she had come West. Funny, but right now the only reason that seemed right was one that made her shiver.

Dennis had made her carry a gun of her own, a pearl-mounted thirty two, whenever she rode. "Sometimes a horse falls with you," he had said. "If your foot hangs in the stirrup, the only way to save your life is to stop the horse's plunging with a bullet. Always remember that."

It had never happened to her, but now— She rose swiftly, slid from the rock. Her buckskin lifted its head, turned toward her. She tossed the reins over its neck and swung into the saddle. For an instant she hesitated. That shot had come from the back and to the left. She was sure of that a moment ago, but now she wasn't quite so positive.

Then her parted lips closed tightly. She drew up the reins and turned her buckskin to the right. The trail—that was it. Someone riding down the trail into the ravine when his horse fell. She touched the buckskin with dulled rowels. The animal responded to her light touch.

It was a full half mile to the spot she had pictured in her mind—a half mile of ravines, steep ridges, clawing brush. But it seemed miles to the excited girl. For the first time since she had come West, she was on her own. She tried to tell herself that she was not frightened—that the shot had not really meant anything. Deep in her heart, she knew better.

She topped the jagged ridge across the stream from where the bushwhacker had hidden. Her wide eyes were upon that prone body, down there beside the creek. Her breath came sharply; her heart seemed to leap into her throat. A startled exclamation was hardly louder than a whisper.

"I—knew it! I was sure—"

Her gaze pulled from the body for an instant, rested upon the hammer headed bay that grazed on the new shoots of willow along the stream. The horse seemed uninjured and the saddle was straight upon its back. Her eyes swung back to the man.

The buckskin was picking its way

down the steep cut-bank now. Mavis Nolan's heart thumped her ribs, and her breathing was short and shallow. She was conscious of her hands trembling as they held the reins. The man was dead—she was sure of that. The way he lay, motionless and sprawling—the blood that was visible on his face now. And she had never been alone with a dead man before.

THE buckskin horse halted at the edge of the clattering stream. The girl touched it with dulled rowels. She tried to speak, but the words would not come. Slowly, reluctantly the animal stepped into the cold water. Then it jacknifed across, coming to a halt right beside the body.

Mavis dropped her reins, and her hands clutched the saddle horn tightly. She knew she had to dismount, but dreaded it more than anytning she had ever done. She doubted if her trembling knees would hold her up—doubted if she could force herself to touch the body.

She shut her eyes, grasped the horn still tighter and withdrew her right foot from the stirrup. Then she froze in that position, a shiver of fear and horror chasing itself up and down her spine. She couldn't have moved to save her life. That voice, hoarse and croaking, hardly strong enough to reach her ears—unintelligible words that ended in a gurgle—then deathly silence.

With almost impossible effort, she forced herself to open her eyes—to look down. The man's eyes were open now, staring glassily, sightlessly upward. His lips were moving, with little crimson bubbles pushing between them. His hands were groping helplessly, aimlessly on the ground.

"You—you're—alive!" Mavis Nolan's whispered words were as much a question as a statement.

A faint moan came up to her now. The lids closed over those glassy eyes. But the hands continued their aimless movement. The girl forced a measure of calmness into her brain, steadied her trembling by sheer effort. Stiffly, woodenly she climbed from the saddle. She was conscious of a hint of surprise that she did not collapse in a heap.

With the reluctance of deadly fear, she forced herself to kneel beside the prone man. Without its registering clearly in her mind, she saw the ghastly gash across his head—saw the round spot of crimson on his broad chest. She knew that bullets had caused both wounds.

His movements had ceased now. No more crimson bubbles on his lips. Her hand went out haltingly, touched his doeskin vest and pressed tighter. For a few seconds she hardly dared to breathe. She caught her breath sharply, for a faint heave and fall told that he still lived. She laid her ear to a spot just below the crimson stain. A slow, faint thump came to her.

She leaped to her feet, looking around desperately. The man was alive, but death seemed close. He'd have to have skilled attention quickly. Perhaps even now it was too late. And she was alone. No one else she could look to for help.

"Can't you—if you only could—if only you'd—" She shook her head in panic. Her voice raised to a half scream.

Apparently that sound penetrated the depths of the man's brain, touching some last thread of consciousness. For now those glassy eyes opened again, and his lips moved wordlessly. His hands took up that groping again. Mavis Nolan's desperate gaze swept to the bay horse, a dozen yards down the stream.

As many flying steps took her to its side. She grasped the reins, whirled and urged it toward the wounded man. He was still moving, still trying to utter words through stiffening lips. His eyes were wide but unseeing. She stooped and grasped his hand.

"Can't you—get up—can't you help—"

Woodenly, awkwardly like a puppet on a string, he rolled over. A deep groan came from his crimsoned lips. His body jerked convulsively. But now he drew up his knees beneath him. With almost superhuman strength, Mavis Nolan helped him.

Then he stood beside the hammer-headed bay, swaying, groping. The girl supported him, guided him. And as she worked, she talked in disjointed sentences that she would never remember.

"You've got to get into—got to climb onto your horse. You must have a doctor. You're almost—"

With the little help the man was able to give, she hoisted him across the saddle. His head hung down one side and his feet dangled on the other. She tried desperately to get him to sit up, but her words did not seem to penetrate his brain. At last she gave up.

With the tie rope from her own saddle horn, she thonged him in that position. Then she swung onto her buckskin, still grasping the bay's reins. She turned her mount toward the Box N, the home spread. It was a full two miles, and she knew that it would have to be made slowly and carefully in spite of the desperate need for speed.

LATER that trip seemed like a nightmare to her. As the horses twisted and turned, stumbled stiff-legged down steep cut-banks and jack-knifed up others, she knew the wounded man was being hurt even more grievously.

When, after what seemed hours, Mavis drew up in the ranch yard and dropped from her saddle, she was almost afraid to approach the bay and its burden. She knew the chances were strong that the journey had finished what those bullets had so well started.

With trembling fingers she loosed the tie-rope. The body slid limply from across the saddle and collapsed in a heap on the ground. Swiftly she straightened out those twisted legs, rolled the man onto his back. Her ear rested against his chest again. That faint, shallow breathing was still noticeable.

"You're not—you didn't—"

With sheer desperation, she dragged the man into the low, rambling log and stone house. Across the main room and into the bedroom beyond. It was her own room, but she did not think of that—then. She didn't remember how she got him onto the bed—she only knew that she did, somehow.

She racked her brain to recall what she had learned in school about first aid, but all she remembered was that a wound should be cleaned and that bleeding should be stopped if possible.

Back in the kitchen, she set water to heating while she searched the little house for clean white cloths. Back again in the bedroom, she took the doeskin vest from the unconscious man and bared his chest. A round hole, blackened now but rimmed with crimson, told where the bullet had entered. She cleansed the hurt, fingers trembling as she touched the bullet hole with the cloth dipped in hot water. Then the jagged wound across his head.

She bound both as well as she was able. Now she drew back, frightened eyes upon him. "I've got to get a doctor! Got to ride to Grinnel—"

The sound of hoofs reached her from outside. She sped to the window. Dennis was just riding into the ranch yard, followed by Sam Carson and Blake Greer, his two riders. Mavis turned and pulled the window shade down, throwing the room into partial darkness.

She raced to the door and closed it behind her. More slowly she crossed the main room and stood in the doorway. She had tried to compose her expression, and thought she had done well in the attempt. Dennis swung from his saddle at the hitchrail, as the two men drew up beside him. He handed his reins to Sam Carson, and the riders headed for the horse shed, fifty yards beyond the house.

CHAPTER II

DENNIS turned and waved a hand at his sister. Then he ducked under the rail and stepped onto the slab porch. A smile was on his lips, but it faded as he caught a closer glimpse of his sister. He took a swift step to her.

"Sis! What's the matter? You look as if you were frightened half to death—as if you saw a ghost!"

"It's—it's—nothing, Dennis!" Then came tears that she could not stop, sobs that she could not stifle. She swayed toward her brother and he swept her into his arms.

"What is it, Mavis? Tell me, quick!"

The feel of his arms around her, the broad chest against her face was comforting—quieting. As he led her to the big chair in front of the fireplace, she partly regained control of her emotions. With halting, stumbling words she told him what had happened. He watched her face, wide-eyed, until she had finished.

"You got him onto his horse and brought him here? Alone? But I don't see—"

"I—I couldn't Dennis, but I did. And now he's got to have a doctor right away. He's dying—he may be dead now."

Dennis Nolan rose quickly. "Let's take a look at him, sis! Then I'll head for Grinnel and bring out Doc Barstow."

The girl led the way across the room into the bedroom. While Dennis moved over to the bed, she threw up the window shade. A streak of light fell across the man's face—glinted from the open, glassy eyes. Even as she turned, she caught mumbled words that she knew came from the stranger.

She reached Dennis' side. There was a strange, taut look on his handsome face—a tightness around his eyes and lips as she looked down at the stranger. She caught his gaze sweeping to the broad-brimmed black Stetson on the floor, to the doeskin vest with its intricate stitching, which lay beside the man—to the gold snake ring on his finger.

"What is it, Dennis?"

He half turned to her to speak. But now the mumbling became disjointed words. She saw that those glassy eyes were a little clearer.

"Where—am I? I—I don't remember—I can't—"

Mavis Nolan dropped to her knees beside the bed, while Dennis stood above her, looking down with narrowed eyes. She spoke almost in the man's ear.

"You've been hurt badly. But you're all right now. We're going to bring a doctor—quickly. He'll take care—"

"But—I don't know who— I've been trying to—think for—ages!"

His voice was a little stronger, but with a note of hysteria. "I'm nobody —without a name. I can't remember—"

There was a strange, frightened, desperate look in his eyes that sent a shiver up Mavis Nolan's spine. She rose and stood beside Dennis. Her eyes turned up to him. Her lips parted breathlessly.

"Dennis, he's conscious, but he doesn't remember anything."

"Come out into the other room, sis!" Dennis Nolan spoke abruptly, almost grimly.

She blinked. Then she nodded. She turned to the man on the bed. "Just don't worry—try to rest. We'll have help in a little while."

Then she followed her brother into the main room. He closed the door behind them and turned to her. His voice was low but steel-threaded as he spoke.

"Do you know who that man is, Mavis? Have any idea who you brought home with you?"

The girl looked at him, blue eyes and wide lips parted. She shook her head. "I never saw him before, Dennis. He's a stranger. But does that make any difference?"

"You bet it does." Dennis Nolan's voice was grim and hard. "That man is Caddo Seiler!"

"Caddo Seiler? You mean—"

Dennis nodded. "Caddo Seiler, the road agent—the killer—a man with a price of five thousand dollars on his head!"

FOR a moment Mavis Nolan stood as if stunned by her brother's words. She had heard of Caddo Seiler, knew of his wickedness and his crimes. She had imagined him as a monster in appearance—big, brutal, ruthless. Not the tawny-haired man with the almost handsome face who lay on her bed.

"I don't believe it," she whispered at last. But her words and tone lacked assurance.

"There's no doubt," Dennis said evenly. "Those clothes—and that snake ring—have almost become a signboard up and down the range. They're known wherever he has operated. It has been a matter of perverted pride with him to wear them."

"Then what are we going to do, Dennis?"

"I'm riding to Grinnel after Doc Barstow—and Sheriff Glover."

"But you heard what he said, Dennis. He doesn't seem to remember anything—doesn't know who he is—or where. It would be almost cruel to arrest him, when he doesn't—"

"Whether he knows or not, he's law bait, and the quicker Sheriff Glover puts the irons on him, the better I'll be pleased."

"Please, Dennis—not until he's better. Not until he remembers. He can't escape now. He's helpless. There's time enough later." Mavis clenched her hands tightly as she pleaded with her brother. She turned the full power of her expressive eyes and her soft voice upon him.

Nolan shook his head obstinately. "I'm sheltering no killer, Mavis. He belongs in jail—on the gallows—and I'm seeing that he gets there."

For a moment the girl was silent. An emotion that she did not understand, could not explain, swept her. It might have been pity—perhaps a maternal instinct for shielding some helpless creature—or something still beyond that. No matter what, it seemed terribly important that the wounded man should not be jailed.

"Maybe you're right, Dennis," she said at last. "If he is an outlaw—a killer—he should be—"

"Sure!" Dennis seemed a little relieved. "You stick here. I'll tell Sam and Blake to keep an eye on things, while I'm gone for Doc Barstow and Glover. Ought to be back in four-five hours."

"But, Dennis, I'm afraid—afraid to stay here with him. Let me ride to Grinnel. I can make it as fast as you. Please, Dennis!"

"It'll be dark in a half hour, sis. And no telling who or what—"

"I'm not afraid of the dark, Dennis—not nearly so much as I am to stay here with him. Please!"

"If you're dead set on it, I see no reason—"

Without waiting to hear more, Mavis sped to the bedroom for her hat and her leather jacket. She shot a glance at the man on the bed. He lay with his eyes closed, but she could see his lips moving ceaselessly—could see his hands groping aimlessly on the blanket. She sensed that he was no worse, but certainly no better. There was no time to lose.

Back in the main room, she faced Dennis again. "Don't tell Sam Carson and Blake Greer, Dennis. Just say that the bay horse wandered in this afternoon. No telling what they might think or do. And after all, it is no use to get them excited."

Nolan's eyes narrowed jut a little, and there was a speculative gleam in their depths. But at last he shook his head. "Don't worry about Caddo Seiler, sis. He'd be lucky if he died in bed. And don't fret about Sam and Blake. They've been excited before."

The girl turned from her brother and opened the door. In the gathering dusk she could see Sam Carson and Blake Greer down at the horse shed. The hammer-headed bay was just be-

WT

yond them. Mavis sensed that Carson and Greer were talking about a saddled horse with a strange brand and no apparent owner.

She curbed her impulse to quicken her step as she made for the shed. She stopped for a moment beside the two riders and a faint smile quirked her lips.

"Came wandering in this afternoon. I thought that the owner would show up by this time. But maybe he was left afoot a good long ways off, may still be walking—or he may be lost."

BLAKE GREER grunted and Sam Carson looked at her strangely. She brushed on by them and entered the shed. In a moment she came out, leading her buckskin. She swung into the saddle, turned and lifted a hand to the men. Silently they watched her as she neck-reined the horse into the Grinnel trail. Then they headed for the house.

Once out of sight of the Box N house, she touched the animal with her rowels and lifted it into a ground-covering foxtrot. Every impulse was to push the horse to its limit of speed, but she knew she could make better time by conserving its strength.

Through the three-hour ride to the little cowtown, Mavis had plenty of opportunity to think the whole thing out slowly and carefully. She tried to make herself agree with Dennis that the wounded man should be turned over to the sheriff at once. Tried to make herself hate him, despise him as he deserved. But she could not rid herself of that strange feeling. She could remember him only as a helpless, hurt creature—a creature who needed kindness and care.

She was still muddled, undecided when she urged her buckskin down the slope and swung into the main street of the little town. Darkness had long since fallen, and a sprinkle of lights twinkled from the scattered structures that made up Grinnel. When she pulled her animal to a walk as she came abreast the sheriff's office, and saw the orange square of light that told her Sheriff Glover was in, she still wasn't sure.

But she did not stop her horse there—couldn't bring herself to do it. Instead, she moved on slowly for another block, to pull up in front of the unpainted frame shack that housed Doc Barstow's office. It was dark, and she caught her breath. Maybe the problem was going to be solved for her. Certainly if Doc Barstow was gone, she'd have to ride back to Sheriff Glover's office.

She swung stiffly from her horse at the hitchrail. For a moment she hesitated. Then she crossed the narrow wooden sidewalk and knocked at the slab door. For what seemed like dragging minutes, she waited for an answer. Again she knocked a little louder. Her heart beat at double time as she caught the shuffle of slippered feet inside.

The door opened, and the shadowy figure of Doc Barstow stood in the opening. A tall, thin figure with a shapeless robe draped over narrow shoulders. His head was thrust forward and she could see the flicker of the starlight reflected in his intent eyes.

"Who is it? What d'you want this time of night?"

Mavis Nolan knew that testy voice—knew that it masked one of the kindest hearts on the whole range. She smiled tremulously.

"Mavis Nolan, Doctor Barstow. May I come in?"

"Mavis Nolan, huh? Might as well." He stood back for her to pass.

As he puttered around in the little room finding the lamp and striking a match, he talked disjointedly. "Haven't seen anyone from the Box N for a long time. Must be a husky an' busy outfit. Hope nothin's happened now. Your brother, now—"

He turned from the shelf and held the lighted lamp in front of his face. His eyes peered into Mavis Nolan's. Apparently he read the fear and inde-

cision in them, for his words stopped short. He shuffled to the crude table and set the lamp upon it. Then he slumped into the big chair on one side and gestured the girl into one across from him.

His voice was firmer, crisper when he spoke. "All right, girl. What is it?"

In halting words, Mavis told him all that happened that afternoon. He listened silently, nodding now and then. When she had finished he looked at her squarely.

"Of course I'll go and do what I can. But your brother is right. It is a job for Glover, just as much as me. Caddo Seiler is the wickedest outlaw who has ever infested this range. So crooked that he even robbed his own gang. The law has put five thousand on his head and his outfit wants his life."

"But you don't understand, Doctor Barstow! He doesn't know who he is —can't remember. He's hurt—close to death! He may be dead when we get back! It can't do any harm for you to see him alone, at first. Couldn't you—couldn't you do that?"

Doc Barstow leaned across the table, his wise old eyes studying Mavis Nolan's white face. "You're not sort o' going soft on this here stranger, gal?"

Mavis Nolan shook her head emphatically, and a surge of red suffused her face. "Certainly not! I've never seen him before. And he's an outlaw and a killer!" Then an uncertain look crept over her face. "The very vehemence of her denial disturbed her.

"I don't know," Doc Barstow said slowly. "It isn't reg'lar. Sheriff Glover'll be right put out. You're sure you're not—"

"He means no more to me than a hunted, wounded creature—than a bird with a broken wing, or a calf being worried by a lobo."

"He's no bird or no calf," Doc Barstow said drily.

"Then a bobcat harried and cornered by a pack of dogs!" Mavis said quickly.

At last the old doctor rose and stepped toward the door of the lean-to at the back of the office. "I'm taking your word for it that he's bad hurt," he grunted. "So bad hurt that any excitement might kill him. That's the only way I can quiet my conscience."

"Then you're going—alone?"

"Yeah, I reckon I am."

Doc Barstow and Mavis Nolan rode silently out of Grinnel. For a mile or more, after the little town disappeared behind them, neither spoke. And even then their talk was disjointed, as if each was worried and uncertain. Mavis Nolan breathed a deep sigh of relief when the light from the window of Box N came in sight.

They pulled up at the hitchrail and ground-anchored their horses. Doc Barstow followed the girl into the main room. Dennis Nolan stood in the center beside the table, his eyes upon them. For a moment he did not speak, but the girl knew he was more than a little put out when the shriff did not follow them inside.

His eyes seemed to accuse her before he spoke. "You didn't bring Glover, Mavis! I should have known—"

Dr. Barstow broke in, and Mavis Nolan felt a surge of relief at the thin doctor's words. "I figured it was better for me to see him alone first, Nolan. Don't like to have my patient's excited. Time enough for Sheriff Glover, after we get him fixed up."

"Reckon sis told you who he is?" There was a challenge in Dennis Nolan's question.

Doc Barstow nodded. "Caddo Seiler, according to all accounts. Seems probable. He was headed this way."

"Then why in hell didn't you—"

"Steady, Dennis," the old doctor said evenly. "My job is saving lives —even if the law takes 'em later. Now let's see this hombre."

Dennis Nolan stood aside, and Doc Barstow made for the door to the bedroom. Mavis and her brother followed at his heels. They stopped just inside the room, and Barstow stepped to the bed.

CHAPTER III

THE wounded man's eyes were open, and in the tricky lamplight, Mavis Nolan seemed to read a little more strength in his face. Perhaps it was only hope, but she tried to tell herself that she was looking at him in calm disinterest.

Doc Barstow stood by the bed only a moment. The girl caught his muttered exclamation as he turned and picked up his little black bag. She stepped forward to his side. She could almost feel the wounded man's blue eyes upon her back. A strange sensation that sent a shiver up and down her spine. Doc Barstow shot a sideways glance at her, but kept right on selecting bottles and instruments from his bag.

He straightened and turned back to the man. He felt the pulse in the man's wrist, and nodded in satisfaction. "Little faint, but thumping steady."

Now he half turned and spoke to Mavis. "Going to be a little unpleasane. Maybe you'd better let Dennis help me."

"I'll—help." The words came haltingly.

The doctor grunted a wordless answer. He took the bandages from the man's chest, nodding in satisfaction at the way they had been placed. The hole in the man's chest had stopped bleeding, and was rimmed in blue-black puckered flesh. Doc Barstow held his ear close—listened intently for a dozen breaths.

"Missed his lung, looks like. Don't hear any leakage."

For the first time Mavis dared to look into those blue eyes that followed the old doctor's movements. They held a strange look—a helpless, almost blank expression. Such a look as a baby might have. A look that told her plainer than words could that the wounded man did not understand what was going on.

"A basin of hot water," Doc Barstow grunted without turning.

The girl whirled and darted past Dennis, who still stood beside the door. She hastily poured the water from the steaming teakettle into a tin basin and hurried back. Already Doc Barstow was probing in the wounded chest.

The expression in the man's eyes had changed now. They were pain-filled, but still as helpless and bewildered. His lips were clamped tightly, and what little color there was had drained from his face.

At last the probing was finished. Doc Barstow lifted the man gently to a half-sitting position. His eyes held for a moment on the hole beneath the shoulder blade. He nodded.

"Steel-nosed bullet. Made a clean hole all the way through. Lucky to've missed his lung. He'll pull through—with good care."

"But the wound on his head—" Mavis Began.

Dr. Barstow smiled crookedly. "Just creased. Reckon it hurts a heap worse than this one, but it isn't dangerous."

The man's eyes still followed the doctor, and the old man turned at last, a little testily. "Why're you lookin' at me, Seiler? I'd do my best for anyone—killer or saint."

The man's lips moved. Then slowly whispered words came—words that Doc Barstow and Mavis Nolan had to lean close to hear. "You—call me—Seiler. Is that who I am? I don't know—don't remember—"

Again that crooked grin on Doc Barstow's lips. "Reckon you're Caddo Seiler, right enough."

"But who—is Caddo Seiler? I've never heard of—"

Dr. Barstow straightened, his brow furrowed in a frown. Swiftly he examined the deep gash across the man's head, nodding to himself. Mavis watched breathlessly.

"It could be," Barstow grunted. "I've heard tell of it. Seems about the right place."

"Right place for what?" the girl asked quickly.

"It's called amnesia—lost memory.

May last for months, or may come back any time."

"Or it may never come back?"

Barstow nodded soberly. "Hard to predict."

DOC BARSTOW packed his bag and headed for the door. As he passed Dennis Nolan, the young rancher followed—then Mavis. When the door closed behind them, leaving the wounded man alone, the doctor turned to the girl.

"He's in bad shape. Dangerous, but not exactly critical. Won't be up and around for a couple of weeks at least. Won't be able to make a run for it, even if he remembered who he was."

"You mean—"

Doc Barstow nodded. "Best for him if he's not bothered—by the sheriff or anyone else. I'll keep my eye on him. Drop by every day or two. But the minute he's able, I'll have to tell Sheriff Glover that he's here."

"I don't want a lobo like Caddo Seiler on the place—not for a single day!" Dennis Nolan burst out. "He deserves all he's got, and more. It's too bad that bullet didn't—"

"He can't be moved now," Barstow said evenly. "Anyhow, a man is supposed to be innocent until he's proved guilty. You couldn't swear that he's Caddo Seiler—now could you?"

"That's all damn foolishness!" Dennis snapped. "Wait, I'll show you!"

He turned on his heel and strode back into the bedroom. In a moment he returned with the clothes that the wounded man had worn. He held them up to Doc Barstow. First the broad hat with its snakeskin band, then the tight-fitting pants, and last the doeskin vest with its intricate stitching. The old doctor nodded as each was displayed.

But when Nolan held the vest in front of him, Doc Barstow's eyes narrowed slightly. For just a moment that furrow appeared between his eyes again.

"He was wearing these things when you brought him in?" he asked the girl.

She nodded. The doctor's glance went back to the vest. He shook his head slowly as if something puzzled him—something that he could not quite put his finger on. Then he turned to Dennis.

"According to all descriptions, that hombre must be Caddo Seiler. He's worn those clothes so much that they're almost his brand."

"Yeah—an' that snake ring on his finger!" Dennis said. "You saw that?"

"Looks like there couldn't be no mistake."

"Then you'll tell Glover to come an' get him, pronto?"

"Can't have him moved yet." The old doctor was obstinate. "I'll tell Glover in plenty of time."

Nolan still glowered when Doc Barstow took his leave. But the old doctor had extracted a promise that Dennis would do nothing about the wounded man until he gave the word. The puzzled frown still furrowed Barstow's brow all the way to Grinnel, but not for many hours did a half explanation come to him.

When Mavis entered the wounded man's room next morning, he was still asleep. For a long minute she stood almost above him, looking down at his ruggedly handsome face. It didn't seem possible that he was a thief and a killer. She told herself that there no lines of wickedness and depravity on that face—no evil twist to the generous mouth, no sign of weakness in that square chin.

She shook her head slowly. The evidence was plain and unmistakable, though. Perhaps she was letting her sympathy for the wounded man sway her better judgment. Caddo Seiler was an outlaw and a killer, without a single redeeming feature. And there was no doubt that this man was Caddo Seiler.

AS THE girl stared down at the man, his eyes opened slowly. For a little time it seemed that he did not

see her. There was a faraway, almost blank look in those blue eyes. Slowly that expression changed to one of bewilderment. Almost instantly a look that was almost fear crossed the man's face.

"You're feeling better?" The girl was conscious that her question was inane and trite.

The man's voice was hardly above a whisper. "Much—better." Then a deepening of that bewildered look deep in his eyes. They seemed to implore the girl above him for help.

"But—I still—don't remember—Can't—" He closed his eyes, then opened them quickly. "Last night—someone called me Caddo Seiler. Is that my name? Am I Caddo Seiler?"

Mavis nodded and bitterness tinged her words. "You're Caddo Seiler. There seems little doubt of that. Your clothes are Caddo Seiler's—your horse is his."

"But who—what happened? Caddo Seiler sounds familiar somehow—but I can't seem to remember—" His voice trailed off.

Crisply, without waste of words, the girl told him how she had heard the shots—had found him and brought him to the Box N house. He listened, watched her lips as she spoke, but she knew that he still did not understand.

"You know Caddo Seiler—the doctor and the other man know him. But I, who am Caddo Seiler—don't know—don't remember. Who—what kind of a man—I thought the others didn't like—"

Mavis steeled herself, forced the last feeling of sympathy from her mind. "Caddo Seiler is an outlaw—a killer. There is a price on his—on your head. Five thousand dollars. And your own outfit is hunting you for double-mind. "Caddo Seiler is an outlaw—a man who deserves hanging."

The man tried to force himself into a sitting position, but he fell back with a groan of agony. His blue eyes went wide—stricken. His lips trembled a little and the last vestige of color drained from his face. His whisper was still lower.

"And I'm Caddo Seiler! I can't believe—I don't feel like— You're sure? You're not just trying to—"

Mavis shook her head. "I'm sorry, but that's the way it is."

"You brought me in—saved me from death! You got a doctor for me—"

"I'd do the same for any man—or any animal."

For a long moment his stricken eyes held her. Then he drew a long, quavering breath. "I—believe you—would." His lips tightened. "And now that I'm not going to die—just yet—I'm ready to give myself up to the law."

The girl caught her breath. "You mean you're not going to try to escape? That you're ready—"

"If I'm Caddo Seiler—if I've broken the laws as you say—I must pay for it."

MAVIS was silent for a breathless dozen seconds. Then she half turned, only to face him again. "That's something to think about when you're better. Right now you need rest and care. It'll be two or three weeks before you can be moved. Much can happen—"

The girl's words broke off short. For she had been looking at the strange snake ring on his finger. It was a little loose, and had slipped down to the bronzed knuckle. There was something about the finger and the ring—something like a vague memory of other fingers and other rings, yet strangely different. It was disturbing because she could not quite puzzle out what it was.

"You've worn that ring for a long time? You haven't—"

The man shook his head. "I don't know—I can't remember."

"You can't—that's right. But it's one of the identfying marks of Caddo Seiler."

Suddenly she whirled on her heel. "I'll have Dennis watch out for you

for a while. I'm going into Grinnel. I must see Doctor Barstow at once!"

"Dennis? You mean—"

"You saw him last night. He's my brother."

"Your brother." It seemed to Mavis that there was something of relief in those whispered words, and a little wave of anger swept her.

She closed the door behind her. Dennis was just coming in from the corrals. She hurried to him. "Dennis, I've got to go to Grinnel to see Doctor Barstow. If you'll take care of—of Caddo Seiler—"

"Yeah? Looks like you're taking a lot of interest in that killer. It would please me plenty if you'd bring Sheriff Glover back with you. Every minute that lobo is in my house, I—"

Mavis brushed past him and sped to the horse shed. In a few minutes she led her saddled buckskin out, swung aboard and neck-reined the animal into the Grinnel trail. For a mile or more she urged the horse at top speed to keep up with her swirling brain. Then she pulled the animal down to a walk, conscious that she was being unnecessarily cruel.

But when she dropped down the slope into the little town two hours and a half later, she was still in the twisted maze of her thoughts. She knew there was something mighty important lurking in her brain, but she could not bring it out.

She pulled to a halt at the upper end of the street. There was unusual activity in the sleepy town. Several horses were ground-anchored in front of Mapes' Store. Three or four men were huddled in a close group on the hotel sidewalk and two more were walking briskly down toward Sheriff Glover's office at the far end of the street.

Mavis urged her horse past the livery stable and on toward Doc Barstow's little office. She felt the narrow-lidded gaze of the men in front of the hotel and gave them a sidewise glance. Their hatbrims were pulled low and they did not look up. In that quick glance she knew they were strangers.

Her heart skipped a beat. Strangers were no rarity in Grinnel, but right now she was jumpy. She pulled her buckskin to a halt at the peeled pine hitchrail and swung from her saddle. For an instant she swung her gaze to the two men who were turning into the sheriff's office. Then she ducked under the rail, crossed the rickety porch and opened Doc Barstow's door.

The old sawbones was working at a little bench beneath the high square window. For a few seconds he did not look up—kept right on with his work. Then he straightened and turned on his heel. His grave face lighted up as he saw the girl.

"Wasn't expectin' such pleasant company, Miss Mavis. It's a real treat to see a pretty face after looking at these Grinnel mavericks for days on end." Then the smile faded. "But what brings you to town this morning? The stranger—has he—"

Mavis shook her head. "He's better, Doctor Barstow. But he still doesn't remember. He asked me outright who Caddo Seiler was, and I told him."

"Yeah? And then what?"

"He wants to give himself up to the sheriff. Thinks he should pay for his past deeds."

"Right noble sentiments, Miss Mavis. Not at all like the real Caddo Seiler. Never heard of amnesia changing a man's character like that."

"Doctor Barstow, it's about that—about something I can't just place. Do you think maybe he isn't Caddo Seiler, after all?"

DR. BARSTOW'S eyes narrowed. His chin thrust forward and his gaze held upon the girl's eager face. "I hadn't thought of that, Miss Mavis. After all, he was wearing Caddo Seiler's clothes—answers Caddo Seiler's description—riding Caddo Seiler's horse."

"But isn't it possible that someone else—"

Doc Barstow shook his head. "Possible maybe, but not likely. What did

he say when you named him? Did that name bring back any traces of memory?"

"He said it had a familiar sound, but that he didn't remember anything about it."

"Can't look for returning memory so soon, of course. But it don't sound well for your hopes, Miss Mavis. Is there anything you can base your idea on?"

"About the ring on his finger, Doctor Barstow—that snake ring. It doesn't quite fit—a little too loose. Beneath it, his finger is as brown as the rest, as if he hadn't worn it long."

"Wouldn't be evidence in a court of law. Lots of men don't wear their rings continuously."

The excitement and hope seemed to fade from the girl's face. Her Irish blue eyes misted for a moment. "Maybe I was just hoping too much, Doctor Barstow."

The old doctor looked at her long and steadily. "A while back you told me you were not personally interested in the wounded man, Miss Mavis. I hope you haven't changed."

The color flooded back to her cheeks. She lifted her chin high and her eyes seemed to flash sparks. "I told you the truth! He means no more to me than any other hurt creature. Why should he? I first saw him only yesterday!"

"All right. All right! I was only asking. You ride on back home. I'll be out to see him tomorrow morning."

Discouragement—and a strange feeling she could not explain even to herself—sat heavily on the girl's shoulders as she turned from the old doctor and stepped toward the doorway. She was forced to concede what she thought had offered conclusive proof turned out to be only a bare possibility.

But now she stopped suddenly. Her breath came sharply. A sense of swift fear—not for herself but for the wounded man out at the Box N—swept her. She didn't know just why the sight of the old sheriff plodding across the street toward the doctor's office should affect her so, except that there was something grim and inexorable in the old officer's stride.

She whirled back to Doctor Barstow. "Sheriff Glover is coming! And those two men are hurrying for their horses! Dou you suppose they've found out—that they know—"

Dr. Barstow turned from his bench where he had resumed his work. His narrowed eyes held upon the sheriff's plodding figure for a second. Then he spoke sharply to the girl. "Into the back room, Miss Mavis! No use to give him ideas by seeing you here!"

Mavis had scarcely reached the little room behind the office and closed the door when Sheriff Glover stepped onto Doc Barstow's sidewalk and crossed to the door. She stood silent, almost breathless with her ear close to the slab. But the sheriff's booming voice would have reached her through a foot of stone.

CHAPTER IV

"CADDO SEILER is onto our range, Doc! Jes' been talkin' to the boss of a posse that chased him down here. Figger he's out in the badlands toward the Box N, headin' for the line. I'm ridin' with 'em! Deputizin' you to watch out for my office whilst I'm gone."

"Those strangers — they're a posse?" Doc Barstow spoke slowly. "Who are they? Where do they headquarter? How come you wasn't notified? You sure you're not—"

"Papers all in good order!" the old sheriff answered excitedly. "Started from up north two-three hundred miles. Been trailin' him for weeks. Gettin' closer all the time. Nigh time for the showdown, and I aim to be among them present!"

"Maybe, but I'm not—"

"No time to argue, Doc! I'm ridin' pronto, an' you're tendin' to my office. Nothin' to do but keep an eye peeled. No prisoners in the cell—no warrants to be served." He tossed a

bunch of keys onto Doc Barstow's table, whirled on his heel and hurried out of the little office.

Doc Barstow watched him, eyes narrowed and brow furrowed in deep thought. That something that had puzzled him the night before had risen again and demanded an explanation, but for the life of him he could not quite remember what it was. He did not appear to notice when the door opened behind him and Mavis Nolan stepped into the room.

"Those men, and Sheriff Glover, do you think they know—that Caddo Seiler is at our place? Do you think they've—"

Doc Barstow shook his head, the frown still on his brow. "I don't know, gal, but I doubt it. Maybe those men are officers, but they don't look like it—don't act the part. I watched 'em ride into town. Didn't like their looks then, and I don't now. Got an idea buzzin' around in my head. Maybe it'll light soon, but right now it's only buzzin'. You better be heading home. I'll study this thing out. If anything turns up—"

"You'll let me know at once."

"I'll let you know, Miss Mavis." Then, as the girl turned to the door he called after her, "Better circle wide. You don't want to get mixed up with Sheriff Glover and his posse."

For a full half hour after Mavis Nolan disappeared over the first rise out of town, Doc Barstow stood on the sidewalk beneath the rickety wooden awning, his eyes on the trail. That buzzing idea in his head was beginning to take shape, but it was still far too hazy really to make sense. He turned into his office at last.

His eyes dropped to the ring of keys on his table. A twisted smile played across his face. "Reckon I'll play sheriff for a spell. Always wanted to be a law officer when I was a kid. Don't know why I ever turned out a range country sawbones."

He trudged across the dusty street and entered the sheriff's office. It was a littered, dingy little room, sparsely furnished with a rickety table, a battered desk and three or four chairs. The one big chair behind the desk was thickly cushioned, and Doc Barstow dropped into it. A smile flicked his lips as he noted the spur scratches on the desk top where Sheriff Glover was accustomed to rest his heels.

He leaned forward and pulled open the desk drawer. It held a battered star or two, a gunbelt with filled holster and two or three boxes of cartridges. His smile widened as he pinned one of the stars on his shirt front. Then he rose and buckled the gunbelt around his thin waist. His narrow shoulders straightened for just an instant. But the grin changed to one of self-derision. He slumped into the chair again.

For an hour or more he scarcely moved. His eyes were almost closed and his hands lay loosely in his lap. But that furrow of concentration still held between his eyes. There was something back there in his brain—something that seemed immensely important, but he could not put his finger upon it. It exasperated him like forgetting a man that should be familiar.

AT LAST he drew a long breath and straightened in his chair. He blinked swiftly, leaned forward. For the pound of hoofs reached him from outside. Then as he turned he saw a horse and rider swing in to the hitchrail.

Doc Barstow's keen eyes took in every detail of the man as he swung from his saddle. A tawny-haired man with a square face, high cheekbones, straight, thin mouth. A stocky, broad-shouldered body, dressed in regulation range clothes. But Barstow's eyes held inevitably upon that glittering shield upon the man's calfskin vest.

"A deputy U. S. marshal," Doc Barstow muttered. "Seems like Grinnel is getting all broke out with law officers."

He rose as the stocky man crossed the sidewalk and pulled the door wide.

He was still standing stiffly and silently behind the desk when the man took two long strides across the room. His eyes swept the newcomer from head to toe, noting every detail.

"Clothes don't quite fit him—Levis a little too long—shirt a little tignt—hat just a fraction big, bullet hole in vest," Doc Barstow mentally noted.

Then the stranger was speaking. "You the sheriff?" He did not wait for an answer. "I'm Buck Rowley, deputy marshal from up Silver City way. On the trail of Caddo Seiler."

"You're hunting Caddo Seiler, huh?" Doc Barstow's words came haltingly.

The tawny-haired man nodded. "Yeah. Nigh got him day before yesterday. Reckon I winged him. Thought for a minute he was down. But he got away. My damned broom tail took that minute to throw a shoe an' go lame on me."

"Day before yesterday," Doc Barstow said slowly. That idea was close to the surface now. "Day before yesterday—an' you're just showing up now."

The stranger grinned crookedly. "Yeah—now. Got lost, like a damn fool. Thought I was headin' for Grinnel, but p'inted my bronc's nose the wrong way. Been wanderin' around in the badlands ever since, until I ran across a sheepman who told me the way here."

The stranger lifted his hand to push back his broad-brimmed Stetson. Doc Barstow's eyes narrowed as he watched. That idea was fighting to burst through now, but it would not quite come. The man's hand dropped. The old doctor spoke slowly.

"Where did you sight Caddo Seiler? Where did you wing him?"

The stranger waved a hand off toward the northeast. "Out there twenty-thirty miles. Gunned him about a mile or so from a canyon—hit him twice, I think. Once with my rifle an' once with a six-gun. Ought to've downed him, but he's tough. He didn't fall. Then was when my hoss went lame on me. Had to let him go."

"Reckon that would be the canyon out toward the Box N. spread," Doc Barstow said slowly. Then he nodded. "Yeah, I think I know about the spot. And you're thinking—"

"He couldn't get far with my bullets into him. Likely he's holed up somewhere out there. My idea was for me an' you to ride out that way—pick him up or his carcass. I'm honin' for the five thousand reward."

Doc Barstow nodded. "Sounds reasonable. But you see I'm not the sheriff. Just deputized, while he and a posse are out looking for Seiler."

The stranger's eyes narrowed and his lips thinned. A rasp crept into his voice. "Posse, huh? Which way they lookin'?"

"Out in the badlands toward the Box N—same place you saw him."

"What business has a tinhorn local sheriff got rammin' his head into my business?" the tawny-haired stranger burst out. "Reckon that reward looks big to him, an' he aims to beat me to it."

A WINTRY smile flicked Doc Barstow's lips. "Don't think the reward had anything to do with Sheriff Glover's riding. And the posse isn't local. Outfit from up north two-three hundred miles. Right ornery looking bunch, if you ask me. I wouldn't have taken 'em for law officers. Six of 'em, riding with tied-down holsters."

Doc Barstow was sure he caught a flicker that was close to fear in the stranger's eyes. His own face did not change expression as he continued. "They don't know the country, and Sheriff Glover isn't much of a tracker. Still, they may find Caddo Seiler."

The stranger whirled on his heel, stared out of the window for a second. It seemed to Doc Barstow that the man had become suddenly afraid, that he was on the alert, ready to break and run for it. His bearing and actions were not at all what a U. S. marshal's should be.

He turned back to the old doctor. "I don't want to get in the way of no posse. Let 'em hunt if they want to. Plenty big country out there, an' chances are ten to one they don't find him."

"Then you're giving up?"

The man leaned forward, his face hard and his lips bared back in an almost snarl. "Giving up, hell! I'm holin' up out there out of sight until the posse quits combin' the brush. I'll begin where they stop off."

Doc Barstow nodded slowly. "Sounds reasonable, Rowley. I'll tell you what—I don't like the looks of that posse. And anyhow, it'd tickle me to get the best of Sheriff Glover. I'm willing to help you."

A twisted smile crossed the stranger's face. "Good! I'll split the reward—four parts for me an' one for you. All you need to do—"

Doc Barstow broke in on the man's words. "You hole up near that big camel-back boulder you'll find just an hour's ride northeast along the Box N trail. When Glover and the posse come in, I'll ride out and tell you what happened—go with you to look for Caddo Seiler. That is, provided they don't find him first."

"And you'll keep shut about seein' me, about talkin' to me. I got an idea I know that posse. If I'm right, they don't like me none too well. Beat' em out on two or three jobs."

"Yeah, I'll keep still," Doc Barstow agreed mildly.

"It's a deal!" the stranger said. "I'm countin' on you, an' if you double-cross me—"

Doc Barstow stood on the sidewalk in front of Sheriff Glover's office, watching the tawny-haired stranger ride out of Grinnel. When the man and horse disappeared across the first rise, he stepped from the sidewalk and angled swiftly across the street to Mapes' Store. He opened the door and called to a youngster of twelve or fourteen.

"Hi, Johnny! Ask your pop if you can do a little errand for me. There's a dollar in it for you."

Old Tom Mapes thrust his head out of the lean-to door at the back. "Hi yuh, Doc! Go 'long, Johnny. That dollar'll buy you the rope you been wantin'."

Johnny Mapes' face lighted up. He dropped the broom he had been pushing half heartedly and followed Doc Barstow up to the little office. He held his battered hat in his hand as Doc Barstow explained what he wanted.

"Got to get a note to Mavis Nolan, out to the Box N, Johnny. Reckon your paint hoss can make it right quick?"

"You bet, Doc! Best hoss on the range!"

Doc Barstow grinned crookedly. "You'll have to circle pretty wide, son. Sheriff Glover and a posse are combing the badlands. Don't want you to run into them. They might drill you first and question you afterwards."

Johnny Mapes' narrow shoulders squared and his eyes brightened. "Me an' that 'Pache hoss can outsmart any posse, Doc. Leave it to us."

DOC BARSTOW nodded. Rather trust a youngster than a man on this job, especially a smart, alert one like Johnny Mapes. He turned to his desk and scribbled swiftly on a prescription blank. He folded it and thrust it into an envelope.

"Don't give this to anyone but Mavis Nolan, son. And make it as fast as you can."

When young Johnny Mapes headed into the northeast trail, Doc Barstow turned and made his way slowly back into his office. There he slumped down in his one big chair. For a long time he sat motionless, his eyes half closed and his lips thin and tight.

The explanation of the strange doings in Grinnel that day was wild—maybe too far-fetched—but it seemed the only logical one to the old doctor. If he was right it was going to take some mighty close timing and plenty ticklish handling. He wished there

was someone in whom he could confide, but there wasn't. He'd have to play the game out alone.

Two hours or more after Johnny Mapes left for the Box N, the sound of hoofs on the street outside jerked Doc Barstow from his concentration. He heaved from his chair and stepped to the narrow window. His eyes held upon the seven riders who were pulling to a stop in front of Sheriff Glover's office.

He drew a breath of relief as he recognized them as the old sheriff and the six strangers, when he saw that there was no one else with them. He sensed by their attitude that their hunt had been a washout—that they had not seen Johnny Mapes or the tawny-haired rider who called himself Buck Rowley—and that they had found no trace of Caddo Seiler.

He stepped back and dropped into his chair again. But now his attitude was one of expectant waiting. In a scant five minutes the door opened and Sheriff Glover stepped inside. Doc Barstow looked up, a question in his eyes.

Glover shook his head. "Didn't find no trace of him, Doc—no hide nor hair. That posse seemed right put out." He slumped into a chair across the rickety table from the old sawbones. He leaned forward, his eyes upon Doc Barstow's passive face.

"Somehow I don't cotton to that posse—not none," he said at last. "They ain't carin' none about catchin' Caddo Seiler. All they want is to drill him. You'd figger from their talk that he was plenty pizen to 'em—and that he'd robbed 'em of their last peso."

Doc Barstow nodded. "Wouldn t be none surprised, Glover." For a little while he was silent, drumming on the table with his fingers. Then he looked squarely into the old officer's eyes. "You had a visitor while you were gone, sheriff."

"Huh? Another one? Looks like everything is happenin' all at once. Who was it this time?"

Doc Barstow told him just what had happened while he was gone, leaving out no detail but offering no explanation. When he had finished the sheriff's face held a puzzled expression.

"Looks like Caddo Seiler has become right important all at once. Posse from up north, an' a deppity marshal from the same direction. All huntin' him. You say the marshal figgers he winged Seiler?"

Doc Barstow nodded. Then he spoke slowly, giving each word a chance to penetrate Sheriff Glover's rather slow brain. "He figures he winged him, and I know he did. Yeah, I know more about it than that deputy."

"What d'you mean, Doc?"

"A man wearing Caddo Seiler's clothes and answering to his description was shot up pretty considerable out where the trail crosses that Box N canyon yesterday. Reckon most anyone would have thought he was dead. But he wasn't."

"You're talkin' in circles Doc, an' you've got me dizzy. I don't savvy what you're drivin' at."

A twisted smile flicked Doc Barstow's face. "I don't either, Glover, not exactly." Then he began at the beginning and told Sheriff Glover what had happened, withholding only the place where the wounded man was holed up.

Even then the story left Glover bewildered. He shook his head and his shaggy brows drew together in a frown.

"You knew that, Doc, an' you didn't tell that deppity marshal? An' you didn't tell me, until it was too late to do anything about it."

"It's not too late," Barstow said evenly. "Caddo Seiler can't get away. Couldn't ride if he wanted to—won't be able to fork a horse for two weeks at least. Anyhow, he don't remember any thing that happened before he was gunned."

A grin crossed Sheriff Glover's face. "I know what you're figgerin', Doc. You aim for you an' me to pick him up after these here others leave—aim for us to collect the reward."

Doc Barstow shook his head. "I didn't tell you quite all, Glover. Not quite all I know—and none of what I've got a hunch is behind the whole affair. That's a professional secret that I'm keeping, unless you'd like to follow my hunch alongside of me."

FOR a little while Sheriff Glover's eyes were narrowed and his jaws were set stubbornly. Doc Barstow could see that the old officer was trying to make sense of the story, and having little success. He could see, too, that Glover was a little proddy about following anyone else's lead. But at last he nodded reluctantly.

"I'll trail along, Doc, pervided it ain't outside the law."

"Huh! How many times have you caught me lawbreaking, Glover?"

"I wasn't accusin' you, Doc. Tell me what you aim to do, an' what my part is."

"All you're to do is to take that posse out to the Box N. Circle the canyon wide. Get there by nine o'clock. When you ride up, you're under Mavis Nolan's orders. Do exactly what she says."

"That's all? You ain't tellin' me what's to happen then?"

A smile without humor crossed Doc Barstow's face. "I'm not plumb sure myself. But unless I'm miles off the trail, you'll get a chance at Caddo Seiler."

Sheriff Glover shook his bewildered head. "Sounds plenty spooky to me. But I'll give you my word."

He heaved himself from his chair and turned toward the door. Doc Barstow called after him. "Remember, Glover, don't go off half-cocked. And don't be surprised at anything that happens. Keep your hand close to your holster and your eyes wide open."

"Don't need to tell me anything like that, Doc," Glover grunted. "Ain't I been sheriff here for twenty years?"

"Young Johnny Mapes rode into town a half hour before it was time for Sheriff Glover and the six strangers to head out. His eyes were wide and a broad grin split his face as he came into Doc Barstow's little office. When the doctor handed him a silver dollar, the grin widened.

"Miss Mavis done gave me one just like it, Doc," he said excitedly. "Two dollars! I can get me a rope an' a silk neckerchief, too."

"Fine, Johnny. But did she give you any word to bring me? Did she read the note and—"

"Said to tell you she understood, an' would play the game just like you said, Doc. I didn't know what she meant. Never heard of no girl playin' games."

Doc Barstow's smile answered the youngster's. He drew a long breath of relief tinged with excitement. "It's a new kind of a game—one girls can play, too. But you'd better go 'long back to the store, son, in time to pick out your rope and neckerchief before dark."

After the youngster was gone, Doc Barstow dragged his chair to a spot from where he could watch out of the window without himself being seen. He settled himself there to wait, but it was scarcely fifteen minutes before Sheriff Glover stamped from his office, spurs on his heels and his gunbelt buckled around his middle. As he reached the hotel, the six strangers who had been sitting silently on the rickety splint chairs in the lobby rose and joined him. Doc Barstow watched them head for the livery stable, saw them lead out their horses and swing into their saddles.

But he did not move until they were well out of sight across the first rise. Then he rose stiffly. He turned to a curtained corner and lifted down a filled gunbelt. It had been long since he wore it, and its weight seemed strange around his waist. He tried a practice draw and felt a little excited pride that his hand had not lost too much of its cunning.

The old liveryman looked at him strangely when he called for his horse. "Seems like there's a heap of ridin' goin' on aroun' here, Doc. An' that

there pair of hawglegs you're luggin' —I ain't never seen you—"

"Got to make a trip out to the Box N, Holcomb. Lobos a little thick in the badlands."

"Yeah—mebbe two-legged lobos," the liveryman grunted.

CHAPTER V

ONCE in the saddle, Doc Barstow pushed his horse at a good speed. He had figured his timing over a dozen times, and knew that he didn't have any too much to spare. From the top of the upslope above Grinnel, he halted for a moment to sweep the horizon. Sheriff Glover and the posse of strangers were out of sight.

Now Doc Barstow turned his horse into the Box N trail and tickled its ribs with dulled rowels. It swung into a ground-covering fox trot. Three quarters of an hour brought him in sight of the big camel-back boulder. He pulled to a slower gait. Didn't want to appear in too much of a hurry, if the tawny-haired stranger was watching.

There was no sound or movement as he approached the huge boulder. The old doctor's heart beat faster with excitement and apprehension. What if the stranger had not followed his suggestion? What if he had headed deeper into the badlands? What if he had even wound up at the Box N itself?

Now in the deeper shadow of the boulder itself, Doc Barstow pulled to a halt. Dusk was gradually turning into darkness, and the rocks and scrub trees took on strange shapes. Off in a shallow valley to his left a coyote howled weirdly. Another answered from the far slope. A shiver chased itself up and down Doc Barstow's spine.

He began to doubt his own wisdom. Should have taken someone into his confidence. Should have told Sheriff Glover what he suspected. But it was too late now. Have to go it alone. His narrow shoulders straightened as he tightened the reins. But suddenly he stiffened. The breath hissed from his lips.

For a shadowy form had slipped from the shelter of the boulder and stood squarely in front of his horse. Doc Barstow's eyes squinted in the gathering darkness as he leaned a little forward. Then the voice that he recognized and strangely disliked came harshly out of the gloom.

"Begun to think you wasn't comin', feller! Gettin' right proddy waitin' for you. What happened? Talk fast!"

Doc Barstow repressed an almost uncontrollable impulse to snap back an answer in the same tone. Instead, he spoke softly, evenly: "I came as quickly as I could, Rowley. Hasn't been more than an hour since Sheriff Glover and the posse returned to Grinnel."

"Yeah? What'd they find? Didn't catch Caddo Seiler—or bring in his carcass?"

"Came in empty-handed," Doc Barstow said. "Glover told me they didn't find hide nor hair of that outlaw."

A hoarse laugh came up out of the gloom. "If they're who I think they are, they couldn't find a herd of steers in a corral. Likely didn't look within miles of where I saw him yesterday."

"But they did," Doc Barstow answered mildly. "Glover told me they followed the trail clear across the canyon and a mile beyond."

"Huh?" The tawny-haired man's voice was startled. "They crossed the canyon and didn't find— But that don't look—"

Doc Barstow smiled thinly, humorlessly in the darkness. He leaned a little lower in the saddle. "I was just thinkin', Rowley. Maybe I shouldn't tell you—maybe it ought to be a professional secret—"

The man leaped forward, stared up at the old sawbones. "What you drivin' at, feller? If you know anything—"

"But after all, you're a law officer," Barstow continued as if there had been no interruption. "Reckon it's your right to know."

"Know? Know what? Talk, man—before I blast you!"

"I was only thinking of a man I treated yesterday—treated for gunshot wounds."

"Who was he? Is he alive?"

"Yeah, alive. But he doesn't remember a thing that happened before he woke up. Doesn't know his own name. Doesn't know what happened to him."

THERE WAS silence for a moment—then a grim chuckle. "He don't, huh? An' do you think this hombre might be Caddo Seiler?" asked the stranger.

"He might be," Doc Barstow answered slowly. "He had a bullet through his chest and another had creased his skull. But both missed a vital spot. The skull wound caused his amnesia."

"Don't know amnesia or whatever you call it. But I wouldn't be none surprised if that's where my bullets caught him. How was he dressed? Clothes like Caddo Seiler's?"

"I've never seen Caddo Seiler, to my certain knowledge. But he answered all description, from fancy doeskin shirt to his snake ring. Reckon there can't be much mistake on that."

"Then what we waitin' for?" the stranger snapped. "Where is he holed up? Why ain't we after him?"

"Guess it's my duty to turn him in. But you'll promise you'll go easy? He's a mighty sick man right now. Won't do to move him for a week or more."

"Go easy on him, huh? Yeah, I'll do that!"

Doc Barstow smiled thinly in the darkness. He read more in the tawny haired man's tone than the words expressed. "I'll lead you to him, then. You can serve your warrant—guard him until he can be moved."

The harsh laugh came from out of the gloom again. "Yeah, I'll stick with him! Where is he?"

"Climb onto your bronc. I'll lead the way," Doc Barstow answered softly. "It's not far—only an hour ride."

Doc Barstow did not head directly toward the Box N. Instead, he took a twisting, turning path that would lead well to the south of the spot where the trail crossed the canyon—the spot where the wounded man had been shot down. The longer path would not only give Glover and the posse time to get set, but would confuse the man who rode at his heels.

More than once in the hour and a half through the tangled badlands, Doc Barstow was ready to admit to himself that he was lost. But each time some recognizable landmark, some twisted tree or strangely shaped boulder would set him right.

Then, far ahead and a little to the right a single flickering light appeared. The old doctor drew a long breath of relief. The Box N house was only a mile ahead. And best of all, that light told him that all was clear and ready. He quickened his pace, and the man behind held right at his heels.

They drew up for a moment just a hundred yards behind the low, rambling house. Its shadow loomed against the gray of the sky. The light came from a single window in the lean-to kitchen. The rest of the house was dark. Doc Barstow spoke softly to his companion.

"Reckon they're in bed. Hate to wake 'em up at this time of night."

The tawny-haired man chuckled hoarsely. "They wouldn't be asleep if they knew Caddo Seiler was there, an' they'll damn soon know."

The man brushed past Doc Barstow, urging his horse to a quicker pace. Doc Barstow touched his own animal with dulled rowels. He drew up beside the stranger.

"You'll let me do the talking—first. Might be dangerous to break in on them, unless we give our names and business. The Nolans are likely to be a little proddy, anyhow."

The pair pulled to a stop at the hitchrail in front of the dark house, and slipped from their horses. Walk-

ing softly, they stepped across the ranch yard and onto the narrow porch. Now Doc Barstow crowded past the stranger and knocked sharply on the door.

For a full minute there was silence. Again the knock—this time louder, more insistent. Another pause, then the flicker of a match and the steady flame of a lamp shone through the window at the left. Now shuffling feet sounded from inside. Doc Barstow's hand dropped to his holster. He could hear the man's quick breathing behind him.

THE door opened a crack. Doc Barstow caught a glimpse of a white face and a pair of Irish blue eyes, wide and frightened. A thin smile crossed his lips.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm Doc Barstow, Miss Mavis. And I've brought a man who thinks he might know the wounded man. May we come inside?"

Slowly, hesitantly, the door opened a little wider. Now the slim figure of Mavis Nolan, wrapped closely in a robe, holding a lighted lamp in one hand, stood in the opening.

"You couldn't wait until later?"

"No time to wait!" the tawny haired man growled. "Aim to look at that hombre now!"

He tried to sweep Doc Barstow aside, but the old sawbones held his ground. He spoke again, still softly, evenly: "We'll have to come in, Miss Mavis. This is Buck Rowley, deputy U. S. marshal."

Wide-eyed, the girl backed from the door. Doc Barstow stepped in, the stranger pushing him close from behind. "Where is he?" the man demanded.

The girl's lips parted, but the words would not come. Instead, she turned and took a step toward the door that led into the room where the wounded man lay.

"Aim to have a look at him pronto!"

"You may be a lawman, but I'm a doctor," Barstow said evenly. "I'll see him first. According to law, even an officer waits on a doctor's word."

The tawny-haired man glowered at Doc Barstow, but stood aside. The slim doctor turned on his heel, gestured Mavis to his side. When the girl was close, Barstow spoke in a whisper.

"Is he better? Does he remember anything yet?"

"He's a lot stronger, Doctor Barstow. And I believe his memory is returning a little. Twice this afternoon he asked me if I was sure he was Caddo Seiler. Said he must have known Seiler, but didn't feel like that was his name."

Doc Barstow nodded. "Possible that his memory will come back all at once, if he sees someone he knows—hears a name that strikes the right note in his brain." Then he leaned a little closer. "Everything set?"

The girl nodded. A thin smile flicked Doc Barstow's lips. "Then get ready for some real excitement." He turned and opened the door into the bedroom, slipped through and closed it behind him.

In the dim light of the lamp, the wounded man on the bed seemed asleep—or dead. But as Doc Barstow moved closer, he saw the man's eyes open, saw his head turn a little. Barstow leaned over him.

"How do you feel, feller?"

A humorless grin split the man's drawn face. "Not so bad, Doc. Plenty sore—stove up like an old cuttin' horse. Wouldn't mind that if only I could remember—"

Doc Barstow shook his head. Then he drew one of the six-guns from his twin holsters. He placed the butt in the man's hand. The wounded hombre looked at him with a questioning glance.

"Reckon you can lift it, if need be? Think you can trigger it if the notion strikes you?"

"Yeah—guess so. But why—"

"Ever hear of a law officer named Buck Rowley?" Doc Barstow's words were sharp and clear.

A strange look swept the man's

face. He blinked swiftly, opened his lips to answer. Then they closed tightly for a second. At last the mumbled words barely reached Doc Barstow's ears.

"Buck Rowley! Now that name—seems like I ought to know."

"Never mind now," Doc Barstow said quickly. "But keep thinking it over. Maybe you'll remember more—right sudden!"

DOC BARSTOW turned from the bed and stepped to the door. Now he opened it wide. He caught the tawny-haired stranger's eager glance, saw the twisted grin cross his face. His glance went on past the man and the girl and caught the slow, silent movement of the door behind them.

"He's awake. You can come in now."

The stranger stepped quickly toward the door, but the slim girl was ahead of him. She shot a questioning glance at Doc Barstow. The doctor nodded almost imperceptibly. Then the girl, the stranger and Doc Barstow were inside the bedroom. Doc Barstow stepped a little to the right, and Mavis moved to the left.

Barstow could see the slight bulge beneath the blanket where the wounded man held the six-gun. His own hand wandered to the weapon at his thigh. The tawny-haired stranger took another step toward the bed, his eyes upon the prone form beneath the blanket. His hand hovered over the butt of his right six-gun.

Just for an instant Doc Barstow was afraid. If what he had guessed was true, the man in the bed was in the greatest danger he had ever experienced. If his surmise was right, a job was to be finished in the next few minutes—a job that meant someone's death.

The stranger took another forward step. Now he was almost above the man on the bed. "I've come for you, Caddo Seiler!" His voice was harsh, raspy. "You've reached the end of your rope!"

"You—are—" The wounded man's voice was low, almost inaudible. Doc Barstow had to strain his ears to catch it.

"I'm Buck Rowley, deputy U. S. marshal, if that means anything to you. Got a warrant in my pocket, an' plenty of bullets in my six-gun. Your price reads 'alive or dead'—an' it makes no difference to me which way I take you."

"Buck—Rowley—" Again the man on the bed repeated that name. And now Doc Barstow could see a dawning light of recognition in his eyes. He knew that the man's memory was returning swiftly.

The old sawbones moved up alongside of the tawny-haired stranger. His own voice was low and even. "This is the man you winged, out in the hills, Rowley?"

"Yeah! Same hombre! He's Caddo Seiler, right enough!"

"He was wearing Seiler's doeskin vest when you shot him—the fancy vest with the tricky stitching?"

The man nodded, a slightly puzzled look creeping into his eyes. Doc Barstow edged closer. "Then why is there no bullet hole through his vest, while there is one in yours?" he snapped.

The stranger whirled to face Doc Barstow. His hand caressed the butt of his gun. "What you gettin' at, feller?"

"This man was shot before the vest was put on him," Doc Barstow shot a glance past the man to the door. He drew a breath of relief as he caught a glimpse of Sheriff Glover's startled face—saw the forms of other men behind him.

The burly stranger's shoulders were hunched now and his hands crooked for the feel of gun butts. Doc Barstow could read cold murder in his eyes.

"You're tryin' to tell me that I shot him while he was—"

Now Doc Barstow's gaze held upon the man's left hand. What he saw was the final clincher. "And his finger beneath that snake ring—it's as brown

WT

as the rest of his hand. Not bleached white like—like that streak around your finger."

"Yeah?" The man's voice was a snarl. "An' what of it? What you got on your mind?"

"Just this!" Doc Barstow spoke calmly, coldly. "The man in the bed is not Caddo Seiler, and you're not Buck Rowley. It's just the other way around. You, Caddo Seiler, shot down Buck Rowley. Thought you had killed him. You changed clothes with him, and left him for the coyotes and buzzards. But he didn't die. Mavis Nolan found him—brought him here."

"So what?" The stranger's hand rested on the butt of his six-gun now.

"When you found out he didn't remember anything, you still thought your plan would work—until you could collect the reward and head for the line. You didn't think of the little things that might upset that plan."

Now Doc Barstow risked a glance at the wounded man. He could see by the hombre's face that full memory had returned. Could see other things, too. He knew that with that returning memory, a surge of strength had swept the man—knew that the hand gripping the six-gun beneath the blanket was ready.

"Nothin's upsettin' my plan!" the tawny-haired man snarled. "Not a skinny range sawbones!"

With a swift movement he whirled from Doc Barstow toward the still form on the bed. "Yeah, Rowley! You hear that? Nothin' can upset my plans! You've been on my trail for weeks, but you've reached the end! I didn't get you out in the hills! My own fault, for bein' in such a hurry. But I'll finish it now. Finish the job I started, an' head south where a damned deputy marshal won't dare to follow!"

His six-gun leaped from its holster, swung up. His finger tightened on the trigger as a snarling grin swept his face. It bellowed sullenly as Mavis Nolan screamed. But Doc Barstow's hand struck the gun wrist sharply. The bullet plowed into the floor just beneath the bed.

THE real Caddo Seiler rasped an oath as he swung his gun again. But now the man beneath the blanket had moved. His own gun was out, coming up slowly. A cold smile quirked his lips.

"Reach high, Seiler!" His voice was firm and even. "I'm serving the warrant you took from me, and I'm taking you back!"

A look of swift and sudden fear swept Caddo Seiler's face. His gun hand dropped slowly to his side. He took a backward step toward the door. Mavis Nolan and Doc Barstow watched tensely. They saw the men at the door move silently a little closer until the opening was barred.

The cold smile on Buck Rowley's face still held. His finger tightened ever so slightly on his trigger. "The warrant reads 'dead or alive', Seiler. I'd rather it'd be alive, but if you—"

"Damn you, you're not takin' me back—an' you're not gunin' me down cold, either!" Seiler rasped. "I know you damned lawmen. Ain't got the nerve to shoot a man in the back. You won't shoot me, when I—"

He turned his back to the bed, confident that the deputy would not shoot him down. And then for the first time his eyes caught the men in the doorway. They opened wide, and terrible dread was in their depths.

"You—Garson, Markley, Wasser—What are you doing here?"

One of the men right behind Sheriff Glover rasped an answer. "You thought you'd get away from us, huh—with all the swag! But you didn't make it! We've been after you for a right good spell, Seiler! Now we've got you, we aim to get even."

But now Dennis Nolan with his two cowhands, Sam Carson and Blake Greer, moved out of the kitchen silently, six-guns in hand. Nolan barked a sharp order, from behind the false posse.

"Get 'em high, you men! Reach—before we start blasting!"

At the same time Sheriff Glover's gun swung up and covered them from in front. In the swift turn of action, Caddo Seiler whirled on his heel. His eyes swept the little bedroom, held for a split second on the narrow window. A twisted smile flicked his lips.

His six-gun, still swinging at his thigh, swung up quickly. As he leaped toward the window, the gun bellowed. The bullet plowed into the pillow on the bed. But Buck Rowley's head was not upon it now. The wounded man had rolled from the bed at the first movement. Propped up on his left arm, his own gun came up.

Caddo Seiler whirled and shot again as he reached the window. The bullet sent splinters flying from the floor right in front of the wounded man. Then Buck Rowley shot—calmly, accurately. The six-gun clattered to the floor from Caddo Seiler's shattered right hand. The bullet took its course on up his forearm and plowed into his shoulder.

A choked scream came from his lips. He turned desperately to the window again. But Buck Rowley's voice stopped him.

"Stay put, Seiler! The next one will drill your heart!"

Slowly Caddo Seiler turned. His lips had lost that triumphant sneer of a moment ago. His eyes were filled with fear and his body sagged. Then Sheriff Glover, with the help of Dennis Nolan and his men herded the false posse into the room.

Buck Rowley grinned up at them from the floor. "Looks like the whole Seiler outfit is rounded up—and no thanks to me for it. If it hadn't been for you, Doc Barstow and—" He turned his eyes to Mavis Nolan. "And to Miss Mavis—"

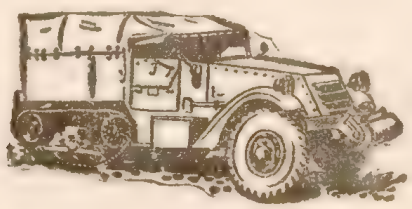
But now Mavis was at his side, gently lifting him back to the bed. "It's all over now." Her voice was choked and low. "It's all over, and he didn't hurt you any more."

Doc Barstow stepped forward and helped the girl. A strange smile played across his face. "It was the faith of this girl that saved you, Rowley. You owe her more than you can ever repay."

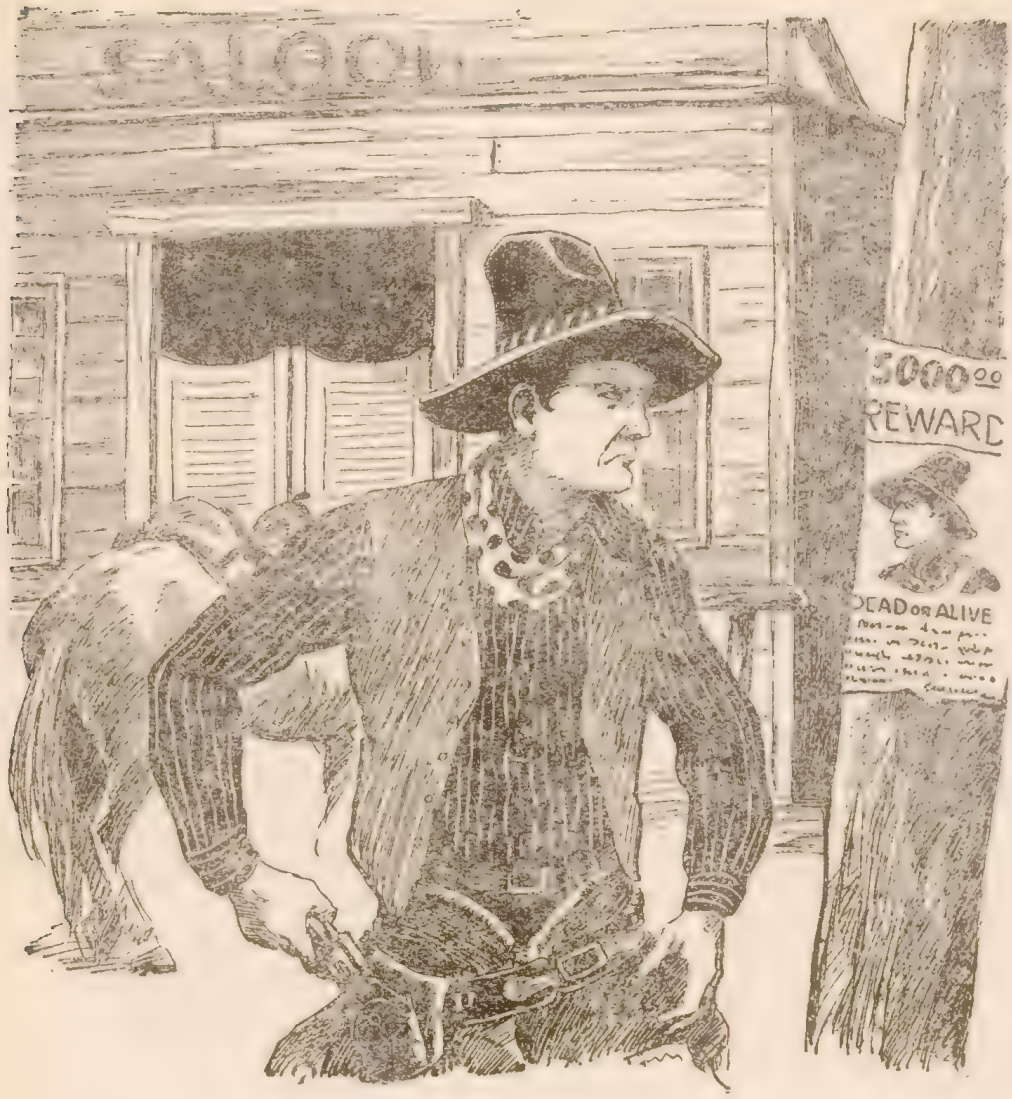
A faint tinge of color painted Mavis' cheeks. "I didn't do any more—"

Doc Barstow straightened. He spoke briskly. "You'll have two or three weeks to thrash that out between you. This youngster is not to be moved for quite a spell. We'll herd these mavericks to the jailhouse. They'll be waiting for you there, Rowley."

As he turned, he caught Buck Rowley's whispered words to the girl who bent over him. "Two weeks are not too long, Miss Mavis. There are a lot of things I'd like to say to you—and it'll take that long to get up my nerve."



Trail-Mates' Treachery



By Quentin Nindorf

When Snap Noebell tried to shoot square with an outlaw gang, he became an outcast from the badlands—and posse bait for the law.

THE five riders wended their way down a narrow, rocky trail through the heavily timbered foothills on the sunny side of Lost River Mountain, with Snap Noebell hanging at the rear. He kept thinking of the poster they had found tacked to a tree when they stole from their hideout in Lost River Sinks. Not once in the two years he had taken refuge

with Tasso's renegades had he known anything like the cold lump of apprehension resting in his chest now.

Suddenly Bud Tasso yanked his sweaty bay back on its haunches. The outlaw chief cursed and flung himself from the saddle. Snap alone remained mounted while the other three swung to the ground stiffly.

They all stared at a weathered poster tacked on a big slab nailed to the trunk of a yellow pine. Painted in large letters on the slab was: CUSTER COUNTY LINE.

Steady pressure of Snap's knees held his powerful, dust-caked blue roan to a quivering standstill. As Tasso's high-strung bay plunged and tossed its bleeding mouth, Snap absently wiped a blob of red-flecked foam from his sun-blackened face. For the third time since leaving the Sinks the tall, lean rider read the same words.

NOTICE

A man who has his left heel shot off wishes to talk to Snap Noebell, pronto, in Mackay. Urgent!

"Another of them notices," snarled Tasso, whirling in a nervous tantrum, a wild light growing in his green eyes as he looked at Noebell. His voice rang with a dangerous, ugly quality. "The whole Lost River range's covered with 'em. Snap, the time's done up and passed when you shoulda talked. Them notices are Injun signs to us. But I'm layin' ten to one they speak open talk to you. Who's this mysterious gent with his heel shot off? Now spill your mind right pronto!"

Tasso went into a crouch and flashed his gun on Snap with his dazzling speed. The weather-blackened skin on the outlaw's long, bony face tightened until it seemed ready to split.

A STRANGE dread convulsed deeply within Snap, yet his brain flamed with an urge to test his speed against the renowned Bud Tasso. But he fought down this wild anticipation leaping in his blood.

"Yeh," he drawled. The long, brown fingers of his quivering right hand slowly relaxed, while a mocking smile twitched the corners of his gash of a mouth. "I was aimin' to set you right about them notices. The gent that put them up ain't no mystery on this here range. And he ain't exactly got his heel shot off. But I rode with him once and he got nicked in the heel. I reckon he figured to let me know who he is without tellin' the whole range. Boys, that gent's name is Hasty Keats—town marshal of Mackay!"

The iciness in Snap's gray eyes faded into a sarcastic light as he saw a grayish hue steal over Tasso's face. The other three outlaws muttered and stirred uneasily out of their startled trance.

"Hell, it's a trap!" ejaculated Wasp Argo, a wisp of a young gunman whose sudden outbreaks made him dangerous at all times. "That Keats gent done cleaned up the Sawtooth gang and he's scared all the owlhoot riders off Lost River range. And ever since we pulled that job at the placer camp above Sunbeam he's been paradin' them town streets waitin' for us to come outa the Sinks."

Off to one side Joey Catfoot muttered ominously in Nez Percé. A chill ran up Snap's spine as he caught a murderous glitter in the breed's dark, oblique eyes.

"Snap, every rider in Idaho knows you trail with us," this was Oklahom, a skinny old outlaw who pulled off his Stetson and mopped his bald head with a red bandanna. "What's the idea of this lead-slingin' marshal callin' for a confab with you anyhow?"

While the outlaws watched him suspiciously, Snap let his troubled eyes wander out over Big Lost River Valley. He heard a train whistling down there somewhere on the new branch of the Union Pacific railroad which reached from Blackfoot across the Snake River to Mackay in a line with White Knob Mountains.

"Snap," said Tasso sharply, slowly sliding his Colt back into its holster,

"with the new U. P. branch just finished this range is ripe for pickin'. All the gold from the placer diggin's even as far up as the Bitterroots will go out of Mackay by rail. Payments for cattle shipments from Big and Little Lost ranges'll be comin' back up the branch. We can't have no split-up in the gang now. We'll be needin' every man."

Snap nodded, and he grew keenly alert as he said, "We ain't in no shape to tackle that new bank in Mackay like we planned to right off. We're all too jumpy after runnin' on them notices. Boys, I'm aimin' to ease down to Mackay and find out what the marshal has up his sleeve."

"The hell you say!" Tasso's words crackled like gunfire and a shock ran up his spidery little figure, while his green eyes flamed. "You ain't aimin' to cross your old pards, are you, Snap?"

ONCE again Snap's brain was fired by the terrific urge of a gunman desiring to test the speed of another and his hand moved close to the black butt of his Colt.

"When I'm out to cross you, Tasso," he barked, his voice ringing through the forest like a steel bell, "I'll step right out and say so. I reckon you should know that. And Tasso—you threw a gun on me today. Don't ever do that again, unless you let her smoke mighty pronto!"

Fine mist gathered on Snap's brow before he saw the tension leave Tasso and his three followers.

"If they don't bury me on Mackay's boot hill," he said, laconically, "you can look for me on the river road in three days. That way you can see I ain't leadin' a posse back with me. Adios."

He reined the roan about and dropped down the narrow trail toward the river plains. A cold feeling pricked up and down his back until he was out of gunshot of the renegades. Then he drew a deep breath of balsam-laden air.

The next evening, hidden on a rocky ridge a short distance from Mackay, Snap ate a scanty meal of jerked venison and washed it down with cold spring water. He peered from his cover upon the little Western boom town which had grown overnight with the coming of the Union Pacific branch. The single street swarmed with railroad workers, drifting cowpunchers, bearded miners and the usual percentage of gunmen and tinhorns.

Twilight was blotting out the last colors of sunset over the valley when Snap mounted and let the roan pick a trail down to the noisy town. With the dropping of darkness Snap had little fear of being recognized, so he rode boldly down the jammed street. He soon found what he was looking for, a log building with a sign swinging in front, reading: *Marshal's Office.*

A queer smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he glanced at the lighted window. He swung from the saddle and hitched the roan loosely to a pole where a big black was stamping and fretting. With nervous fingers he caressed the butt of his Colt and tiptoed to the window, glancing inside cautiously.

He saw a tall, lean man standing beside a crude table shuffling a stack of *wanted* posters. A marshal's badge on the man's flannel shirt flashed dully in the yellow lamplight.

The past made a sudden lump in Snap's throat with a painful, bitter throb as he stared at Marshal Keats' sensitive looking, slightly aquiline nose, a nose identical to one Snap had always adored.

Abruptly, within an inch of Snap's forehead, there was a tacking sound. His startled eyes picked out a tiny round hole in the windowpane even before a gunshot thundered in the dark street behind him.

Snap flung himself flat on the ground, drawing his Colt and setting it to roaring at a second orange flame out of the night. From the darkness came a sharp, painful curse. A hush spread along the turbulent street.

Then the taut silence was broken by drumming hoofs fading swiftly from town.

BEHIND Snap a door rattled open and yellow lamplight flooded him. He whirled in the act of reloading his gun and faced the crouching figure of the marshal.

"Toss that smoke-pole in the room," barked the marshal, his six-gun pointed steadily at Snap's middle, "and ease in ahead of me."

Cursing slowly, Snap obeyed. The marshal followed and kicked shut the door just as Snap whirled with cold anger draining his face.

"I never figured a low-down trick like this from you, Hasty," flared Snap, his face suddenly flooding with bitter savagery. "You trick a fella to come in and have him ambushed like a—"

"Why it's you, Snap! You're here!" ejaculated the marshal, his gun wobbling and sagging. His hazel eyes went wide in wonder and he licked his thin lips. Then his Colt clunked upon the rough pine floor.

Suddenly Hasty Keats sprang into action, grabbing an Indian blanket from a saddle in the corner and hanging it over the window. He then stepped outside the door and yelled at the noisy crowd surging toward the office.

"All right, boys. Just a puncher shootin' up the town. I'll turn him loose when he sobers some."

Snap took this opportunity to snatch his own six-gun from the floor and slide it into its holster. He stood on widespread legs, perspiration hanging to his brow as he fought down waves of emotion sweeping up within him. Warily he watched his old friend and trail-mate come slowly back into the room.

"Snap," blurted Hasty Keats, his eyes slightly dazed, "I swear I got no idea who done that shootin'. You oughta know I ain't no skunk to hire my shootin' done."

With bewilderment and suspicion drumming in his brain, Snap frowned over the puzzle. He felt a surge of relief as he realized that Keats surely had nothing to do with the shooting. But he deliberately ignored the partly extended hand of the marshal, with a sick feeling that he had no right after his years of outlawry to grip the hand of a clean and decent man.

"I reckon we might as well deal a short hand," he snapped, his voice harsh with emotion he did not understand. "I drifted in to find out what them notices mean, Hasty."

Capable as he was known to be, Hasty Keats shook loose the daze that gripped him, strode to the table and fumbled among stacks of papers and posters. He bent a piercing gaze on Snap.

"It's been over two years, pard," he said gruffly. "Man, you shore growed hard and—and fierce lookin' since—"

"Chuck the gabbin'," cut in Snap sharply, "and shoot."

The warmth in the marshal's eyes deepened and he said abruptly, "Snap—Bronc Otaway is dead!"

THE tension immediately went out of Snap's tall frame and his face became gray with hopelessness. "Then there ain't no way on earth I can ever clear myself of killin' that gambler," he said in a dead, dreary voice. "Bronc's the only one that knew Plumber threw a gun on me before I drew and killed him. Bronc lied to frame me—he hated me that much."

"You're a bit twisted up, Snap," smiled Hasty, his eyes brilliant with inner excitement. "Bronc Otaway was gun-shot over in Blackfoot more'n a month back. And before he died he left a confession that clears you of that shootin' scrape."

Snap caught his breath sharply and stared a full minute at the glowing, sunburned face of the marshal. Then he swayed slightly and leaned against the log wall. Irony and passionate bitterness twisted his dark features.

"A hell of a lot of good that confes-

sion does me now," he muttered the misery in his soul. "Two years I been riding with the toughest gang in the Northwest. It's the only refuge I had from posses."

"It might be too late, like you say, but I'm hopin' you're wrong," said Hasty, stepping from behind the table, picking his gun from the floor and sliding it into its holster in his dangerously quick, smooth way of moving. "Everything depends on your answer to a question. And, Snap, I reckon you'll hand it to me straight. Have you killed anybody in the raids you been in on with Tasso?"

"No!" Snap's voice cracked like a whip and he straightened with a jerk. "Except, well—I had it out with one of Tasso's gunhands over in the Sinks. He pulled on me first though. I've had a hell of a time keepin' them gents from spillin' blood on some of them jobs. Lucky Tasso was with me in holdin' them from bustin' loose. Tasso's just as smart as he is bad."

"Good!" sighed Hasty in deep relief, his friendly eyes glowing eagerly. He picked up a long envelope from the table and tapped it with his forefinger. "In here's a paper from the Governor of Idaho, but he ain't signed it yet. It's a—a sort of conditional pardon for you, Snap."

"Pardon!" gasped Snap, his eyes flaring and incredible, his heart bounding hopefully into his throat. "A conditional—what?"

"Snap, with the U. P. branch comin' in, Lost River Valley's openin' fast," explained Hasty, his eyes taking on a hard glint. "And that means outfits like Tasso's are either goin' to drift—or be planted. Snap, the day the governor can stand over Tasso's grave he'll sign this pardon for you!"

The wild hope went from Snap's chest in a painful sigh. To win his own freedom meant betraying Tasso in a low-down way, and this sent a sick lump into Snap's stomach. His nostrils flared and his breath whistled back fiercely into his lungs.

"You're askin' me to double-cross Tasso, ain't you?" he snarled bitterly. "I rode every kind of trail with 'em. They fed me and nursed me when the whole country was houndin' me. They saw me through it twice when I stopped lead. I know somewhere along the trail they done things they shoulda hung for long ago. But still they're my trail pards. What's come over you, Hasty, to ask a thing like that?"

HASTY KEATS, his eyes boring into Snap's face, struck the table savagely with his fist. The dark fury in his lean features shocked Snap and caused him to step back.

"I'll tell you what's come over me, Snap." Hasty shook a finger furiously in the direction of the upper valley. "Up yonder there's a fine, big ranch. There's a bent—a broken old man tryin' to keep that spread together. Every evenin' you'll see this old man settin' on the porch with a white-haired old lady—both of 'em watchin' the valley trails.

"And on a spread across the crick there's a mighty unhappy little girl always lookin' up the trail. That girl's my sister, Snap, and them old people are your own mother and dad. They're watchin' for a rider they ain't got much hope of ever seein' again—watchin' for you, Snap!"

Snap stumbled blindly across the room and hunched down on a bench, burying his white face in his arms on his knees. How vivid to him was the picture of the past, those glorious days of planning and building castles with Susan Keats, that day they had shyly broken the news to the four old people to receive the glad, happy blessings of both families.

But events of another day insisted on searing their way into his throbbing brain. This was the reflection of a dazed and terrified youth flogging a winded horse up the valley ahead of a posse. The details of the gunfight had never been clear to him, except that he had caught the gambler beating a horse. And he had seen Plumber's gun free of the holster before he threw his

own Colt—and Bronc Otaway had lied about the fight.

Blistered on Snap's mind forever was the scene of parting at the ranch, where he caught up his powerful roan, with his folks and the Keats family gathered around in shocked, tragic silence. And even after all this time he sometimes awoke from terrible nightmares as he again visioned Susan Keats stumbling after him, her arms outstretched. She had been sobbing wildly, while his fresh horse strung a banner of dust toward the foothills and safety.

Minutes ticked away on the marshal's big silver watch and presently Snap controlled his overpowering remorse and bitterness enough so he dared raise his pallid face. For a moment he had looked through the sunny gates of a future he had once dreamed of, with only the need of his betrayal of Tasso to open wide those gates to him. But a strange loyalty drummed up in his veins and left his eyes wide and drained to a great emptiness.

"I reckon I can't do it, Hasty," he said in a shaken, hopeless voice, perspiration trickling down his thin, dark cheeks. "Tasso's outfit might be killers and bandits, but I can't lead 'em in a trap like they was common rats. Whatever else they been, they still been my trail pards."

THE knowledge that he had closed forever the doors on a dream that could have been, left a glassy look in his eyes. He watched his decision send a long, painful breath into Hasty's wide chest. Sharp lights sprang into the marshal's eyes and his marvelously quick fingers tapped his gun butt as he spoke in a brittle voice.

"When you clear outa this town tonight, Snap, I'm unpinnin' my badge. I'm takin' the trail of Tasso's outfit—sorta personal like. There wouldn't be no call for folks to be watchin' the trail for you, if you was planted somewhere. I reckon you can understand what I'm gettin' at."

Snap bowed his head and nodded mutely. Cold fingers squeezed almost the last hope from his heart as he thought of his old trail-mate, the brother of the girl he loved, hunting him down as if he were a sneaky lobo. The bitter lights he saw in Hasty Keats' eyes told him what to expect at the end of the trail, for Snap knew he could never raise a gun to defend himself against the marshal.

It was quite apparent that Keats was going to end this in the only way to bring a measure of peace to those dear to him, at least break the strain they lived under. This sent Snap's old admiration and respect for the older man swelling through his heavy heart. Then his mind kindled with a faint, hopeful spark.

"Hasty," he pleaded in desperation, his eyes alive with a sudden thought, "give me a month, will you? Tasso's been itchin' to head farther south toward the big cattle drives. I'll try and get the gang to drift outa Idaho so you'll be shed of 'em. If only Tasso ain't got too set on cleanin' up the range here first. Then I won't never show up near here again. And you can let it leak out that I died out yonder somewhere. Will you do that for me, Hasty—and shake once for old time's sake!"

Hasty hesitated a moment. A faint pallor stole over his face as if he had suddenly gone a bit sick to the stomach. Then his right hand shot out quickly.

On the third day after leaving Tasso's outfit, Snap sat his saddle loosely while the big roan took the river road at a mile-eating lope. A faint banner of dust trailed off to the right across the swollen Big Lost River, which rumbled down the valley toward the Sinks where it disappeared.

To the left a pair of Union Pacific rails stretched away through the wild bottom lands in the direction of Snake River. The scrub pine dotting the river plains presented a vivid contrast to the brown grass after being washed clean by a cloudburst yesterday.

For the first time in his life Snap

recognized a dreadful, fatalistic sensation compressing his chest. Cast behind him forever were his dreams and hopes and ideals, while ahead he saw nothing but the stark realities of a gunman's life, an outcast gunman riding to a showdown with his own kind.

A smoldering heat began to grow in his veins as he wondered how Tasso was going to take the idea of drifting out of Idaho at this particular time.

"He'll drift," he muttered through clenched teeth, "or he'll be planted in Idaho—him or me!"

SNAP'S old desire to test Tasso's amazing speed was again running riot in his blood. The uncertainty of the outcome set cold fingers of dreadful anxiety closing on his pounding heart because of what his failure might mean to the many people up the valley, some of them dearer to him than his life.

And besides, that last handshake with the marshal was a kindled beacon in his brain. For he knew Hasty Keats had taken it as a silent vow that Tasso's renegades would no longer be a menace to Lost River Valley.

In a savage mood, Snap raked the blunt rowels of his spurs along the lathered flanks of the roan. Nearly terrified by this rare brutality the horse convulsed into violent action and thundered down the road across the county line into the more broken and timbered Butte County.

Almost magically Bud Tasso's spidery figure stepped out of a balsam thicket suddenly to stand in the road. Snap brought light pressure to the reins and the roan slid up to the little outlaw.

"Howdy, Snap?" drawled Tasso coolly, a friendly smile cracking and lighting his long, bony visage. "I'm right glad you're back safe."

That smile was the first of its kind Snap could recall ever seeing on Tasso's face. It startled him and chilled him to the marrow. Instantly keen suspicion jarred his brain.

"Howdy, Tasso," he nodded, skillfully hiding the turmoil of apprehension writhing in his vitals. "Where's the boys? We got talkin' to do."

"Yonder in that timber patch." Tasso jerked his head toward the rumble of Big Lost. "Joey plugged a fawn this morning and they're shore stuffin' their guts. Come on."

The little outlaw's rolling gait carried him into the stunted evergreen. Snap kept his hands carefully crossed on the saddle horn and used his knees to guide the roan after Tasso. He was well aware of the disadvantage of being mounted if it came to sudden gunplay, but he somehow sensed that he dared not make the slightest move to warn the gang he was suspicious.

They pushed through the evergreen into a little glade splashed with sunlight. The roan nickered softly to the outlaws' horses as they stood ground-hitched, switching and stamping lazily. Snap took in the scene with a keen, lightning glance.

Joey Catfoot was squatted on his heels near the coals of a dying campfire. The breed merely turned his hideous face to shoot a slant-eyed look at Snap, then went on tearing meat loose from a bone with his big teeth. What was left of the cooked fawn was lying on a heap of fresh evergreen boughs near the Nez Percé.

The skinny form of Oklahom was leaning indolently against a boulder near the fire. His thin hands were hooked in his sagging gunbelt and he nodded calmly to Snap.

BUT Snap could not locate Wasp Argo. He summoned a great deal of will power to continue riding into the glade without first knowing exactly where the dangerous wisp of a gunman was. With cautious knee pressure he kept the roan shifting about restlessly, until he caught a barely perceptible movement in heavy shadows among the low-hanging balsam boughs at the western edge of the recess. Now he knew where the little outlaw was, and he brought both knees

together until the roan stood as still as a rock.

"What's the layout?" queried Tasso in a tone that was too gentle, while he turned and stood with folded arms almost in front of the roan. "Did you give Keats my regards?"

Snap slapped the trail dust from his Stetson on his scarred chaps as if absolutely unaware of the deadly peril he sensed around him. His guarded glance took in the fact that fifteen feet beyond the roan's nose a forty-foot bluff overhung the rumbling Big Lost. Very cautiously he twisted his heels with the big rowels closer to the wet flanks of the roan, and he felt the powerful beast grow taut as a bowstring.

"Tasso, I came back in good faith to warn you Lost River's gettin' too hot for us," drawled Snap, not a tremor in his voice to betray the intensity of his nerves. He noticed that Oklahom and the breed rose to solid footing on the left side of him. The sharp ear of the roan wavered like a compass needle at a spot to the right, where Wasp Argo was hidden, warning Snap the little gunman was moving. "I never had no use for you, Tasso. I reckon you know that. But I never had no idea to cross you. Do you understand that, Tasso?"

Tasso nodded and continued to stand at ease, but pinpoints of hard light leaped into his green eyes.

From under his wide hatbrim Snap rolled his eyes to get a glimpse of Wasp Argo stealthily gliding from cover like a stalking panther. His brain buzzed with enlightenment as he saw the youthful gunman's left arm was in a crude sling. A wave of loathing for Argo swept over him and set his nerves like remorseless steel.

"Tasso, you done the crossin'!" Snap's voice rang through the little glade harshly. "You sent Argo to kill me in town . . . and I nicked him!"

Instantly Argo's voice crackled like dry wood breaking. "Plumb square on the head, Snap. And I'm handin' 'er back straight and hot!"

Snap caught the blurred movement of Argo's gun hand and, twisting, he whipped his shoulders on the roan's neck at the exact moment to let a bullet hum over him. From this awkward position he made his draw with a jerky, violent movement. He thumbed the hammer back, and it seemed to him that the whole tawny top of Argo's head leaped off and spattered against a tree beyond.

With no time for a second look, Snap switched his eyes ahead, yanked the roan's head high and rammed home the spurs. The roan bawled in terrified agony and bounded forward so violently that Snap was nearly unseated.

TASSO screamed a curse and flung himself from the animal's path. Hoarse yells burst from Oklahom. The Nez Percé jerked his gun free. Wildly aimed shots rang out just as Snap glimpsed the rim of the bluff whipping away from under his horse.

Snap's breath was sucked from him by the forty-foot drop. As he saw the horse was slowly turning over and would land almost upside down he kicked free of the saddle. The impact of cold water nearly stunned him. But he was so alive to the necessity of quick action that he instinctively fought the treacherous currents to get beneath the bluff before he rose to the surface.

He came up gasping, his lungs full of air, and thankfully noted that he was far enough under the rocky projection so he could not be seen from above. Near the jutting wall of rock his feet hit bottom and he looked down with something like incredulity in his eyes at the big Colt still gripped in his right hand.

Anxiously he lifted his eyes over the muddy, swirling water to where the roan was swinging to and fro. Apparently the long line of bluffs on this side looked discouraging, for the horse swam to the other shore, plunged from the water, shaking and snorting.

"There goes his hat," came Tasso's gloating voice, a trifle worried, from

above, "Funny his body don't show up."

"Reckon he's done, all right." Oklahom's slow, nasal voice was slightly shaken and awed. "Did you see him throw down on Argo?"

"Me hit um," stated Joey Catfoot in a stolid tone. "Him eat lotsa water."

"I wish we'd lay eyes on his body so's to be plumb shore," grumbled the naturally suspicious Tasso. "But I reckon he's gone. Well, let's get a-movin'. We're short-handed now with Argo gone. Dammit!"

As the mumble of their voices drew back from the rim, Snap cursed under his breath anxiously. A moment later pebbles showered down and chucked into the river, followed by Wasp Argo's limp body which hit the muddy water with a great splash.

"They ain't even got the decency to bury one of their own riders," snarled Snap under his breath. Something purposeful in the sound of their action above caused anxiety to bulk larger in his chest. "If they pull anything and get away with it, Hasty'll shore think I turned coyote!"

He quickly and cautiously picked his way downriver to where a swale made it possible to mount the bluff. Hastily he stole through the evergreen and reached the camp spot in time to hear the pound of horses' hoofs out on the road. As the sound faded up the river road toward Mackay he cursed sharply, a worried frown creasing his brow.

"Shore as hell, they're on their way to pull the Mackay bank job we planned," he muttered with a start. "But they can't get there in time today. That means they'll hit 'er tomorrow."

SNAP'S brain smoldered more heatedly with thoughts of these ruffians double-crossing him, attempting to ambush him twice, when he had been willing to sacrifice the precious things in his life to remain loyal to them. All kinds of terrible visions hammered at his troubled imagination, such as Tasso's outfit breaking loose and murdering now that he was not with them to hold them in, perhaps even the death of the gun-slinging Marshal Keats.

If anything like that happened, Snap knew he could never face Susan Keats with a clear conscience again. Strangely, in his brain there glimmered a faint spark of hope that he might again ride those old valley trails he loved, if he first broke Tasso's game in Mackay and successfully faced the outlaw's swift, deadly gun.

Snap's jaws tightened with grim resolution as he thought of the plans they had made for robbing the Mackay bank, and he could see no reason why those plans should be changed now. The burning look he sent up the valley boded ill for Tasso's renegades, even though anxiety furrowed his brow deeply.

He swore when he saw they had taken Argo's horse. In the thicket where the little desperado had lain in ambush, he found the dead man's sixty-dollar Stetson, smiled grimly as he tried it on and was satisfied with its fit.

From across the swollen river came the faint nicker of his horse. Some of the hard light went out of Snap's eyes as he saw the faithful beast pawing and rearing on a gravel bar over there. He quickly slipped out of his rider's togs, preparing to swim to the other side. . . .

Before noon the next day he led the roan behind a rocky pinnacle near Mackay. An hour later he pinched out his cigarette as he saw Joey Catfoot and Oklahom ride to the edge of the pine and tie their mounts.

Snap sighed in relief as he saw things working out as had been planned when he was still on good terms with the gang, only now Tasso would have to handle the bank alone. Through slitted eyes he watched the two renegades sneak out among huge boulders and scrub pine on the point of a ridge above the edge of town.

As they had planned, Oklahom and the Nez Percé started their act with a rapid fusillade of shots in the air, yelling and cursing as if they were in a deadly duel. It was expected that they would draw the inhabitants to give Tasso his chance at the bank. And before the mob reached the crest of the ridge, the pair of ruffians could easily escape into the timber, circle to another pine-covered hogback from where they meant to guard Tasso's retreat with rifles.

PERSPIRATION seemed squeezed out in large drops on Snap's brow by the tightening of his insides as he saw those rifles in their hands. The knowledge that those high-powered weapons would bear down on him from some hidden spot as soon as he entered town brought a gray hue to his drawn visage. But his eyes glinted with a fierce resolution that was going to take him down that street to meet Tasso in a few minutes.

It was incredible to Snap how swiftly the town was brought to life by the racket of the two outlaws. It seemed that the whole populace poured from shacks, saloons and log huts to rush to the foot of the ridge where the sham battle was at a noisy height. The mob began surging up the difficult ascent. Then Oklahom and the breed retreated quickly to their horses, mounted and disappeared in the timber toward the place they had picked to watch from with their rifles.

Snap caught his breath and watched Hasty Keats rush from his office. The lawman leaped astride his big black and came tearing down the street toward the disturbance the mob was making.

Then Snap saw a rider cantering swiftly down the river road from the other side of town. His eyes glazed slightly with apprehension, for there was no mistaking the spidery little figure glued to the back of the high-strung bay. Even at that distance something tigerish in the way Bud Tasso sat his mount warned Snap of the terrific dynamo he was about to exchange death with.

A panicky ague gripped Snap for a second as he saw little hope of ever coming through this to meet a future that beckoned. But he only asked for a fair chance to rid the range of this human buzzard, Tasso. Furious anticipation spread through his veins until his skin tingled icily.

Snap saw Tasso ride into the other end of the street before he led the roan away from the pinnacle into a draw. There he mounted and rode down the swale sheltered by scrubby evergreen almost to the town. When he reached the level he put the roan to a swift gallop and burst through the fringe of huts out on the dusty street.

His hot eyes leaped up the street to the lone rider dismounting before the new frame building of the bank. With a nudge of the spurs Snap sent the roan thundering toward the little gunman, who whirled and froze in a low crouch. The intense amazement on Tasso's bony face told why he was incapable of action in that split second. Snap hauled back on the reins, flung himself from the saddle and hit the street running in a cloud of dust.

Through the gray cloud swirling about them, Snap saw Tasso jerk violently and settle deeper into his dangerous crouch, his hand quivering like a claw above his six-gun butt.

Snap looked slack all over, except for his long fingers crooked near his gun butt, and yet every nerve in him quivered on the verge of snapping. Step after step he took toward the outlaw until they stood less than ten feet apart. A sudden puff of dust leaped up at Snap's toes and showered his chaps. Vaguely he heard the whiplike report of a rifle on a ridge about town. Yells broke out from the direction the mob had gone.

"TASSO," said Snap in a deadly quiet tone, his piercing gaze never wavering from the outlaw's wild eyes, "I was fixin' to lead you outa here with a whole hide. But you

didn't trust me. You tried to kill me like a snake. Throw your gun, Tasso!"

Something grabbed briefly at Snap's hatbrim and turned the big Stetson half around on his head, but he barely heard the rifle report following.

"You're askin' for it," taunted Tasso shrilly, his face setting in its old deadly and insolent cast. "I'll shoot your damn eyes out!"

Snap concentrated on the brilliant lights in the gunman's green eyes, lights that grew to penetrating points, then seemed to break suddenly.

Snap threw his Colt, thumbed the hammer and felt hot lead hit him a terrific blow in the left shoulder. He was faintly conscious of being yanked off his feet when his gun bucked, as something hit him another wallop lower down. His head seemed to burst from the thunder of guns and the shock of blood rushing from his startled brain. Vaguely he realized he was groveling in the dust of the street.

"He beat me!"

The thought exploded in a million lights in his brain, the terror of it bringing a last surge of energy to his bullet-torn body. Instinctively he shoved his Colt through the dust in the direction of Tasso, with not enough strength to raise the heavy weapon.

Through hazy vision he saw a spidery figure taking a step toward him, then another sagging step, Tasso dying on his feet. Snap's fighting will power broke under the satisfying realization that he had beaten Tasso, after all, beat him even with odds of hidden rifles. He saw Tasso pitch on his face in the dust before Snap was abruptly enveloped in a great blackness shot with red clouds.

The next thing that registered in his mind clearly was the queer fact that somebody was talking to him for what seemed ages. It cost him a tremendous effort to open his aching, fever swollen eyes. He had difficulty in realizing he was in a bed surrounded by log walls, with Hasty Keats bending over him.

"So you came round, eh?" Hasty's voice came from far, far away, but seemed glad and excited. "Just lay quiet and listen. No talkin' yet. You been one sick hombre. Snap, the dirt's been settlin' on Tasso's grave for eight days. You drilled him plumb dead center. But he got you in the thigh. It's that damned breed and skinny gent that 'most done you in. It took the boys two days to catch up with 'em over in the White Knobs."

Keats patted Snap's thin hands awkwardly and gazed warmly down in the fever-wasted face.

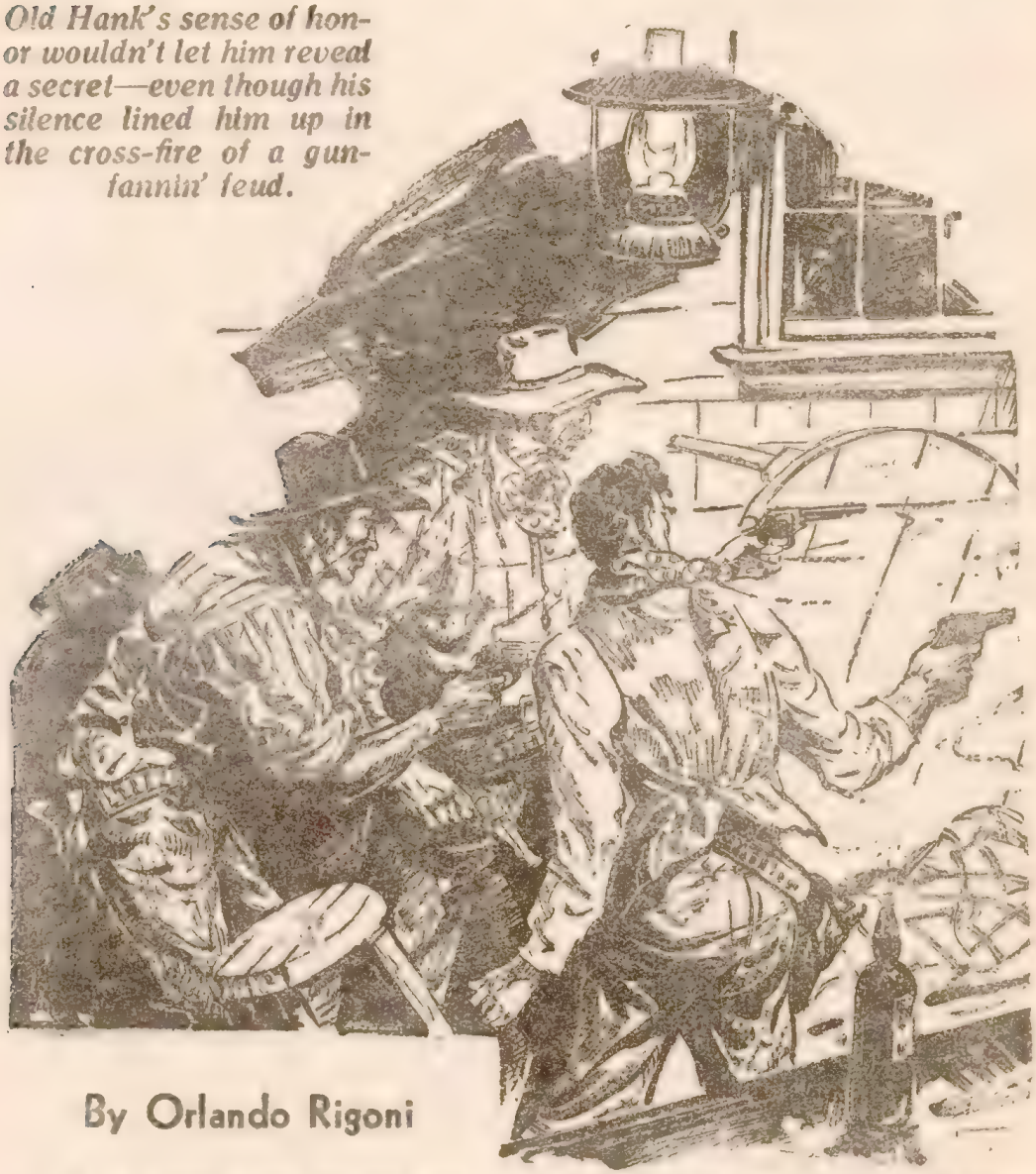
"Pard, you shore didn't have to tackle the whole gang alone to square up for the past. But I reckon I'm glad you done it that way. You'll never have to lower your head in this valley. Just wait till you meet up with the boys! And, Snap, I shore got the best news. The governor made a special trip up the U. P. to sign that pardon of yours! I ain't sent word up the valley—up home— I wanted you to come outa it first so's you'd know what was goin' on."

Snap closed his eyes tightly to hide the emotion swelling up in his weak body, filling his throat with a glad, eager lump. He made several attempts to speak before he could force words through his cracked lips.

"Hasty," he whispered, "don't send 'em word, please. I'm ridin' in on the trail just like they been watchin' and hopin' for."

Boot Hill Sanctuary

Old Hank's sense of honor wouldn't let him reveal a secret—even though his silence lined him up in the cross-fire of a gun-fannin' feud.



By Orlando Rigoni

OLD Hank White wished that it was darker. He sat slouched on the bench before his log shack and watched the five men riding from the junipers below Daisy Mountain and heading toward his door.

Old Hank pulled hard on his wheezy corncob pipe and his keen eyes looked uneasily at the shed where he kept his horses and gear. There was nothing in sight which would betray the man he had hiding in his back bedroom.

Hank knew that the approaching men were the same bunch who had appointed themselves the keepers of the law in Calico. He knew why they were coming to his place, but he felt sure

they had no definite trail to follow. The man in the back bedroom had the appearance of one who could cover his tracks very well.

The posse came in single file, and leading them was Bob White, Hank's own grandson. Bob's parents had died in the flood on the Big Silver when he was but ten, and Hank had raised the kid—until the year before. Then Bob had gone to town, and had been hired by Mike Delong as a rep for his various enterprises which included everything from ranching to faro dealing.

The appearance of the kid in the posse would make it a little tough, but Hank believed he could handle them. He got up and waved his pipe as they rode into the yard.

"Reckon you fellers is lost, comin' way out here. What's the ante?" he asked in his clear, steady voice.

A big man by the name of Jim Trask spurred his horse out in front of the cavvy and touched his hat. Trask had weasel eyes and Indian hair, and his manner was cordial, always.

"We been huntin' a bad hombre, dad. Blacky Sorgen is loose in this section an' we don't aim to let him mark up a tally of corpses like he did down in Bendigo. Colby got a shot at him crossing Wildcat Canyon and swears he shot him. You ain't by no chance seen anything of him?"

Hank's eyes were steady, and he tamped the tobacco down in his corncob thoughtfully. "Reckon I ain't, Trask. Is it allus the custom to hunt down a man before he commits any crime in this county?"

Trask's face clouded. "I can't see that you should make our actions any of your business. Mike Delong sent us out to pick up Blacky Sorgen because Delong has more to protect than any man in the county. While we're here we could do with a cup of coffee, dad."

HANK tensed, but he knew that to refuse them coffee would arouse their suspicions. He had hoped to keep them out of the house, but what any of Delong's men wanted, they took, so he nodded.

"Reckon I can spare some Java. Light down an' come in—or mebbe you'd rather wait out here. The water's bilin' on the stove."

To Hank's relief, Trask said, "Sure, we'll wait here in the shade. Bob can give you a hand with the coffee."

The lean, blond kid was uneasy under the old man's cool stare. Bob could not forget the sacrifices that Hank had made to bring him up right, and he knew the old man didn't approve his working for Delong, but he forced a smile, and nodded.

"Sure, Hank." He always called his grandfather Hank. "I'll help you with the Java."

Inside, Hank poured some fresh grounds in the coffee pot while Bob got out cups, the tin can of sugar, and can of milk. As he worked, Hank watched the men outside, wondering if any of them would search the barn, but none of them stirred from the shade. They were too tired and hot for that.

At last, Hank spoke to the kid. "You're a fool, Bob, to be tracking Blacky Sorgen. If he's as bad as they say, he'll kill you first and ask permission afterward."

The kid bristled, trying to justify himself. "Reckon I can take care of myself, Hank," he said. "Delong is payin' me good wages an' now is my time to earn it."

"What good will your wages do you when they throw your bloody and riddled body at my feet, lad?" Hank asked patiently.

"You're takin' on, Hank," Bob said softly.

So that was all he had to say: *You're takin' on!* Hank felt his love for this boy stir in his old carcass and he dreaded what meeting with Sorgen might mean. Delong had no right to run the law on the Calico Range. What property he had he had obtained by cheating and threats. Of course he paid well, but few men lived long in Delong's employ. There was no use

arguing with the lad. He had to play his own string out.

They carried the coffee out, two cups at a time, and as he made the second trip, Hank noticed something which he had missed until now. There was a smear of blood on the edge of the door. The wounded man must have left it there when he hung onto the door to keep from falling.

Hank wanted to hide the stain, but he knew that anything he did would only serve to draw attention to it. Had the men noticed it? They appeared to be absorbed in their cigarettes and coffee and their talk of Blacky Sorgen. It appeared none of them had seen Sorgen personally, but they had Delong's description of him. Even that description didn't fit the man in the rear room.

Hank hated Delong and all he stood for, and believed there must be some good in any man Delong hated. If a man was bad, Delong hired him. It was the honest men he had to fear.

So Hank breathed a sigh of relief when the men mounted and clattered away in a cloud of dust. He watched them until the trees swallowed them up. Then he turned and, carefully wiping the blood from the door, went inside. Locking the front door, he went into the bedroom.

THE man on the bed lay very still. He was clothed, except for his boots and the part of his shirt which Hank had cut away so he could bandage the wound in the man's shoulder. There was a devil-may-care look about him, but certainly not a bad look.

It seemed impossible that he was the hated Blacky Sorgen, and yet he had owned up to the name before asking for help. Hank remembered the reports of the killing of Slauson down in Bendigo and wondered why Blacky had committed the crime.

The wounded man opened his eyes and tried to grin, but made a bad job of it.

"How are you?" Hank asked softly.

"Stronger, dad," Sorgen said evenly. "Reckon I owe you a lot. I was nigh done in last night when you took me in. I don't want to make no trouble for you, dad, but I couldn't help hearing what you said to the kid in the other room. I hope the young fool never pulls a gun on me."

Hank tensed. "What d'you mean, Blacky?"

"I'd have to kill him if he did."

"Is that a way to repay a kindness?"

"Reckon it'd be him or me, an' I've got only one life to forfeit. I come up here to settle business with Delong. If his gunnies want to hound me afterwards, okay, but right now I'm not taking any chances."

Hank snorted, "Mebbe I should have given you to them gun dogs?"

The man sat up and reached for his boots with his right hand. His left was still in the sling which Hank had fashioned to take the weight off the wounded shoulder. As he pulled on his boots, the man said:

"I don't think so, dad. This thing might turn out different than you think. I ain't honin' to get you into more trouble so I'm traipsin'. All I ask is that you keep the kid away from me."

"He's stubborn," Hank objected. "Figgers he's a man—"

Sorgen cut in, "The kid ain't found out yet what honesty is. You'll never know what's in him until he gets in a clutch."

Without volunteering anything more about himself, Sorgen rose unsteadily and reached for his gun which hung on a chair.

Hank snatched the gun away and said grimly, "You'll have to leave this behind, Blacky. By the time you get another gun you'll be so far away the kid can't bump into you."

Sorgen shrugged and as he walked out into the dusk, he turned.

"Thanks, old-timer," he said softly, "and *adios*. We'll be seeing each other again—right soon."

With that he went for his horse and

WT

rode out of the ranch by the back trail, keeping in the bottom of the wash. Hank watched him out of sight. He didn't see Sorgen stop beyond the bend and retrieve a belt and two guns which he had hidden in the junipers for just such an emergency as this.

Wearily the old man went inside and prepared his frugal supper. By the time he had his plate and cup washed and the dishrag hung upon its proper nail, he heard steel-shod hoofs in the yard and realized he had another visitor. He hoped it was Bob, but before he could reach the door, it opened and Jim Trask came in, his gaunt form dwarfing the room. Trask's weasel eyes were alight with eagerness.

"I want Sorgen, dad. I had to shake those other fools so I could come back alone. I can pry a chunk of dinero out of Delong."

"Sorgen isn't here," Hank said quietly.

"I wasn't born yesterday, dad," Trask snapped. "I saw the blood on the door. You were damned nervous about something—almost spilled the coffee. You was hidin' Sorgen."

"He isn't here now."

"Where is he?"

"Gone."

"Which way did he go?" Anger was mounting in Trask's voice.

"I don't know."

"That's a lie. This is serious business, pop. You aided an' abetted a criminal. Reckon Delong better handle this. We're goin' into town."

Hank couldn't refuse and he didn't try. He believed that Delong would think twice before harming him, so he forked his white mare and accompanied Trask into Calico.

THE town seemed too quiet as they rode up the street which was lighted only by the pools of light spilling from grimy windows. They went into Delong's Delmonico Saloon and found nobody there but the swamper and a couple of barflies who dozed in the far corner. Barney Low, the one-eyed barkeep almost dropped the glass he was wiping when he saw Trask.

"Where's Delong?" Trask asked impatiently.

"Damn glad you came, boss. An hombre with his arm in a sling came in, got the drop on Delong, an' took him away!" Low said, blinking his good eye.

Trask turned and in a sudden flare of temper he struck Hank so hard that the old man fell.

"Go rustle up the boys!" Trask barked to the swamper, and the shriveled up man hurried for the door. "You might find them in Miller's. Send 'em here on the double."

The news that Delong was missing brought the men to the Delmonico fast. They had just come in off the trail and were eating at Miller's when the swamper found them. Leaving their meals, they hurried to get their orders.

When they arrived at the Delmonico, Trask had Hank backed up against the wall. He turned to the men.

"This old coot had Sorgen in his shack when we was there today. I got suspicious an' went back. But he had let Sorgen go, an' Sorgen came in and took Delong out to kill him."

"That's bad," one of the men muttered.

"All right, Hank, where did Sorgen go?"

Hank glared at the men. Not even their numbers nor their reputations could frighten him. The one thing that disturbed him was the sight of Bob White, his grandson, hanging back as though ashamed of his part in this business.

"I told you I don't know," Hank said flatly.

Then Trask started beating him—brutal, deadly blows which would have hurt a younger man. And the posse let the shameful scene go on.

"Where is Delong? You must be in with Sorgen—" Trask snarled, his

temper taking complete control of him.

"I don't know—I don't know. I hope Sorgen gives him the death he deserves!" Hank cried in pain.

Then Trask hit him so hard the old man slid to his knees. The posse refused to interfere with the torture, even then, all but one of them. From the rear of the crowd charged Bob White, his young face gray with flaming anger. His blue eyes awake, at last, to justice and right. In his fists was his gun, and he flung himself against the wall beside Hank. He kicked Trask back with the others while he held his gun on them all.

The daring maneuver had been so sudden the men were taken by surprise. They had forgotten the kid, but now remembered him.

"You dirty dogs, get back! I'm going to kill you, Trask!"

But at the same instant the front doors banged open, and through the opening plunged Delong, his fleshy face crimson with exertion, and rage. His eyes were bright with fear, but on finding himself among his friends, he assumed his old rôle of bully.

"What goes on here?" he demanded fiercely.

Trask, who had felt death crawling within him, turned with frantic hope toward Delong.

"The old coot helped Sorgen get here—hid him out. Now the kid has jumped the traces, an' sold out."

"Why don't you kill him?" Delong retorted. He had always believed the kid a fool, and yellow. Though he had no gun of his own, Delong snatched a gun from one of the posse's holsters and turned to fire at Bob White.

The kid knew what was coming, and suddenly he wasn't afraid. He realized that he could kill either Delong, or Trask. Then he would die from the other's gun. It was Trask who needed punishment. Bob White held his gun steady, jerked the trigger once, twice. He braced himself for the thud of lead even as he saw Trask double up with his big hands holding his stomach.

Then something plowed into Bob White's side. He caught himself, tried to focus his eyes and get a bead on Delong's big chest. But a new, strange thunder was booming in the room. Delong stumbled forward, coughing blood. Another man spun around, with his hands trying to grab onto eternity. The rest of the men let out a howl of defeat and crowded to the back of the room with their hands high.

When the smoke cleared away, the form of Blacky Sorgen with his bandaged arm stood in the side door. Old Hank crawled to his feet unable to believe the evidence of what he saw. He felt Bob's hand steadying him, and though the kid was hurt, he paid no attention to his own wound.

"Blacky—you come back!"

"I didn't figure on this, old-timer," he said evenly. "First off, I'm not Blacky Sorgen. I'm Bill Major, marshal down at Bendigo. I picked up Sorgen for that killin' down there and he told me Delong had hired him to kill Slauson and then refused to pay him off. Sorgen made a threat of comin' up here to get even, and I decided to pose as him as he wasn't known in these parts.

"I figured if I made everybody believe I was Sorgen, Delong would do his damndest to have me killed. If he knew I was a lawman, he'd cover up his deviltry an' I couldn't get anything on him. Reckon he's past redemption now. Looks like Trask treated you bad, old-timer. I'm sorry he's past further punishment. Wish there was something I could do to pay you back for helpin' me out at your cabin."

Hank grinned through his swollen lips. His proud eyes looked upon Bob White while in his mind he saw the kid facing down the gunhawks. If it hadn't been for Sorgen the kid would not have realized the error of his ways.

"Reckon you've paid me back more'n you'll ever know," Hank said quietly and his gnarled hand clung tight to the kid's strong arm.

STAMPEDE

Where our reading and writing waddies get together with POWDER RIVER BILL

REIN up your broncs, pards, and mosey over to Powder River Bill's writin' roundup. Pen-pushers from all over the world are just honin' to tell you about far-away ranges and the folks who live on them. Rope yourselves some new amigos by sending in your letters to the Stampede department. You'll find plenty of hombres and gals who would like to exchange snapshots, souvenirs, and learn about your hobbies.

And, too, Powder River Bill wants to savvy the type of yarns you cotton to, so that you can read them in WESTERN TRAILS. Don't fail to state the names of your favorite authors to insure your getting tophand stories of the brand you prefer. You'll be interested in this month's lineup of writin' rannyhans.

Phyllis is a gal with many hobbies.

Dear Bill:

I am a born Westerner and would like to find some pen pards. I'm 5 feet, 4 inches tall, weigh 124 pounds. I have brown hair, hazel eyes, and am 17 years old.

My hobby is unusual for a girl. It is body building, horseback riding, swimming and all outside and inside sports.

Here's hoping I've found some pen pards. I enjoy your magazine very much.

Sincerely yours,

PHYLLIS E. COOK,
135 Bonito Ave.,
Long Beach, Calif.

An old-time member rides back into the corral.

Dear Bill:

Here I am again after ten years. Still reading WESTERN TRAILS and enjoying all the yarns, spun around the monthly campfires.

If I were to mark the ballot I'd just use one big X to include the whole list. Just can't turn from any of them.

The last time I bunkered and dipped into Dish-pan Charlie's biscuits I made many nice friends. One thing, then another, came up and I lost track of them. I'd like to get in touch with them again, as well as any others that want to sling a little ink.

I'm five feet, ten inches tall, weigh 190 pounds, and am forty-two years old. Have dark-brown hair and brown-green eyes.

PARDNER PETE'S
Bunkhouse Bulletin

Pen Pards who would like an ink sketch o' their snapshot send it to—

DAVID JEROME
539 Brompton Place
Chicago, Ill.

Pen Pards who would like cowboy songs write to

VICTOR MARKS
7127 S. Washtenau Avenue
Chicago, Ill.

Pen Pards who would like poetry written 'bout their picture send it to—

CHARLES J. HERBERT, JR.
c/o Victor St. James
Whittemore, Michigan

—and—

STANLEY C. DeCAMP
c/o Gen'l Delivery, Galion, Ohio

Match-books and postmarks are my hobbies when I'm not writing letters. And I answer all letters.

Thanks to you and a swell magazine, there is never a dull moment

Sincerely,

LOUIS HAMM,
817½ E. 1st St.
Los Angeles, Calif.

Make way for a younker from the Sunny South.

Hello Bill:

I have been reading plenty of western magazines, but WESTERN TRAILS is tops. Enclosed is my ballot and I would very much like to have my name put on the *Stampede* page.

I am 18 years old, 6 feet tall, weigh about 175 pounds. I have blue eyes and brown hair. I like to exchange snapshots and letters.

Sincerely,

JAMES PARRISH,
Roda, Virginia.

Send a line to one of Uncle Sam's soldiers.

Dear Bill:

Being in the army I sometimes have quite a bit of time on my hands.

This time I use up reading magazines and I think I've read about every magazine there is.

But I've yet to find a magazine that rates with WESTERN TRAILS.

I'd appreciate your slapping my handle on your bunkhouse bulletin.

I'm 21 years old, about 5 feet, 9 inches, and have gray eyes and dark brown hair.

I'm thanking you for your entertainment by way of your magazine.

Sincerely,

EDGAR "TIGER" FOWLER.

P.F.C.
Edgar Fowler—20646687
Co. E 127th Inf.—A.P.O.-32
c/o Postmaster
San Francisco, Calif.

An' listen, folks, don't forget to send in your ballots. Here's the ballot. Just mark "1"—"2"—"3"—"4"—an' so on in the order of your likin'.

Adios, amigos—till next time.

Tophand Author's Ballot

WESTERN TRAILS
67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.

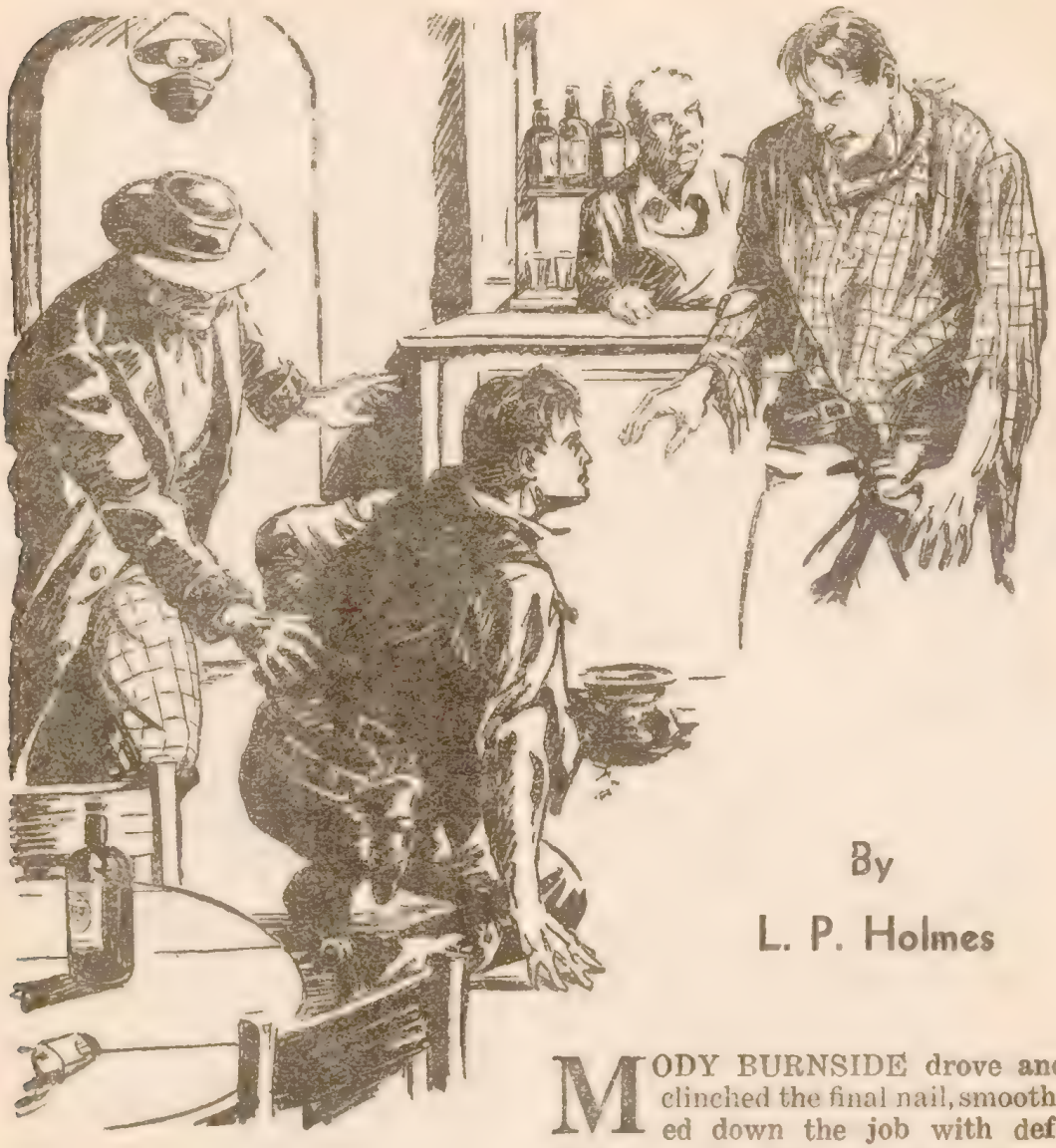
J. EDWARD LEITHEAD — *Twin Triggers and a Crimson Legacy*	
ANSON HARD — *One-Man Vigilante*	
NEY N. GEER — *Dead End Trail*	
GALEN C. COLIN — *Renegade from the Badlands*	
QUENTIN NINDORF — *Trail-Mates' Treachery*	
ORLANDO RIGONI — *Boot Hill Sanctuary*	
L. P. HOLMES — *Blacksmith's Black Magic*	

Name .....

Address .....

For the protection of our readers, WESTERN TRAILS reserves the right to open all Pen Pard mail passing through our hands.

Blacksmith's Black Magic



By

L. P. Holmes

Nobody could figger why the jiggers'd stick up the stage and risk their necks where there wasn't no profit. Then Mody Burnside got the hunch that the sidewinders were throwin' a long rope round Lawman Powers' job. But the outlaws didn't realize that their wide loop ended in a hangman's knot!

MODY BURNSIDE drove and clinched the final nail, smoothed down the job with deft strokes of his big rasp and dropped the hoof. Then he slowly straightened up and wiped the sweat from his brow with a sweep of his big forearm.

"That does it, Kyle," he rumbled cheerfully. "And if you're pinched for ready money you can pay me later. The bay will be a better horse from now on. It was just shod wrong, last time. That's what made him act stiff in the stifles. Weight was pitched wrong."

Rube Kyle, the nester from Burnt Corral, nodded. "Thought so. Feller over on West Fork did the last shoein' job on my team. I figgered he was pretty clumsy about it. Charged me plenty, too. How much?"

Ordinarily the job on the team of slow, heavy work horses would have been four dollars. But Mody Burnside was remembering that Rube Kyle had a Missis and four or five kids, and that those 'dobe fields around Burnt Corral were pretty tough scratching for any man.

"Two dollars," said Mody. "No rush, though."

Rube Kyle dug out the two dollars. "I aim to pay my way as I go along. Mighty fair price. That jigger on West Fork charged me six."

Mody nodded sympathetically. "All robbers in this world don't pack a gun. I'll help you hook 'em up."

They hitched the team to the rickety buckboard and Rube Kyle drove off to Sam Englebright's store for a load of provisions. Mody Burnside fingered the two silver dollars in his pocket and, deciding it was about beer time, stripped off his heavy bull hide apron and banked the fire in his forge. Then, a bare-headed, stocky, powerful figure of a man with a slight roll in his walk, he headed for the Twilight.

Two of the Steuben boys were at Frank Martin's bar. They'd had just a few too many and were argumentative and quarrelsome. They were on their favorite topic, which was running down Joe Powers. Ever since Joe Powers, who had grown old and grizzled at the chore of making the law stand up, had successfully withstood the challenge of Claus Steuben to his office of Sheriff last election time, the Steubens never missed a chance to throw the harpon into him.

Claus Steuben wasn't present just now, but Fritz and Dub were saying more than enough to make up for him. Frank Martin gave Mody Burnside a knowing wink as he slid a cool and dripping glass across the bar. Mody winked back. Let 'em spout. Good old Joe Powers was in for another four years. Which was all that counted.

Maybe Fritz Steuben saw those winks, and maybe he didn't. At any rate, he came up the bar to Mody. "Joe Powers is a hell of a sheriff," he blurted, his tongue a little thick. "He's so old he's simple. There's been two hold-ups of the Humboldt stage in the past five weeks and Powers ain't no closer to clearing 'em up than he was when they happened. Yet a herd of you damn fools turned down a good man to keep that spavined bull packing the star."

"A man's vote is his own business, Fritz," retorted Mody cheerfully. "Difference of opinion is what makes a hoss race. Be a hell of a world if everybody thought alike."

The physical resemblance in the three Stuben boys was strong. Big men and raw boned, with faded, straw colored hair and blue eyes pale almost to glassiness. Claus was the elder, then Fritz, then Dub. They ran a shoe-string outfit on Strawberry with a scattered herd of mongrel cattle and a small remuda of very good horses. They were arrogant, loud of mouth and heavy handed. And not at all popular, as Claus found out when the votes were counted. They drank hard and quarreled among themselves when they could find no one else to strike up a fuss with.

"Joe Powers is a fool," persisted Fritz Steuben, "and anybody who would vote for him is likewise."

Mody Burnside grinned up at him. Mody's face was round with good nature, but just now, though his lips were smiling, his eyes were not. "According to that, this neck of the woods is plumb overrun with fools," said Mody. "Joe had the highest count of votes he ever did get."

In a dim, thick-witted way, Fritz Steuben sensed the sarcasm of this and heavy rage began to burn in his pale eyes. Frank Martin saw it and spoke up quickly. "The election is over and done with. Let's have a drink and

forget it. This one is on the house."

Fritz Steuben didn't even seem to hear him. Instead, he pushed closer to Mody Burnside. "You did a heap of work for Powers," he snarled. "You went a long way out on the trail rustling votes for Powers and against Claus. Ever since, I been wantin' to tell you off. I'm doin' it now." And then Fritz Steuben spoke the unforgivable.

Mody Burnside knocked Fritz Steuben down so hard he bounced. Mody lacked almost a head to meet the height of any of the Steuben boys, but the compact bulk of him was all steel and sinewy power and his fists were like post mauls. Mody didn't take any chances. He went down the bar past the falling Fritz and slammed into the startled Dub, driving him back against the bar. And when Dub bounced back, cursing and dragging at his gun, Mody nailed him just as hard as he had Fritz, dropping him just as cold.

Frank Martin came around the bar at a run, snapped up the guns of the Steuben boys and jacked them empty. "They had it coming, Mody," he said. "But they'll be yellin' for raw meat when they get their brains unscrambled. You better put that beer away and slide out."

Mody nodded, picked up his glass and drained it. "I won't be any further away than my shop," he said grimly. "I got a sawed off Greener shotgun there and if them jiggers come bothering around they'll get all that old gun packs—which is plenty."

IT WAS nearly sundown when Sheriff Joe Powers rode wearily into Greystone City. His bronc was favoring the off front hoof and Powers came right by his office over to Mody Burnside's shop. To Mody's unspoken question, Joe Powers shook his grizzled head.

"No luck. Same gang as pulled the first holdup, I reckon. Four of 'em. They headed for the Greystones where the trail ran out on that damned hardpan. My bronc threw a shoe. Fix him up."

Mody saw the dragging weariness and worry in his old friend's eyes. "You go get some rest, Joe. I'll take the bronc down to the livery barn soon as I get that shoe on. And don't worry about things. That holdup crowd will knot their own tails one of these days."

"Maybe," sighed Joe Powers. "In the meantime they shore are putting a knot in mine. Less I come up with 'em pretty damn quick, a lot of folks are going to start believing what the Steuben boys are spreading around—that I'm gettin' too old to carry the star any more."

By the time Mody had finished with the sheriff's bronc and took it down to the livery barn, dusk was cloaking the town. And at the livery barn he found Worthy Pope, the stage driver, greasing his old thoroughbrace Concord vehicle. Worthy had a new, white bandage around his head.

"I saw Joe come in," he said to Mody. "No luck, I guess."

"Joe run the trail clear back into the Greystones, where it faded out on the hardpan. Same crowd as pulled the first holdup, Joe figgers. Four of 'em." Then Mody added, "If there was just something you could identify about 'em, Worthy."

Worthy grunted. "How you goin' to identify a guy with a flour sack over his head? And there was only one of 'em this last holdup. At least, one was all I saw. He was the jigger who creased me, too. Of course, the rest might have been hid back in the brush, somewhere."

"Must have been," said Mody. "What would one guy want with four broncs?"

Worthy cackled shrilly. "Not to pack the loot away. Them guys shore are optimists. First time they nicked that drummer I was hauling for a couple of hundred pesos. This last time they didn't get a red sou. I didn't have a passenger and one, thin, four bit piece that I had in my jeans was

the only money in the whole layout. They didn't even bother to take that. Me, I can't figger guys pulling stage holdups and risking their necks when there ain't a cent of profit in it. They can be hung just as high for gettin' nothin' as they would if they got a million."

USUALLY, Mody Burnside spent his evenings in the Twilight, playing checkers with some of the boys. But this night, on the chance that the Steuben boys would be hanging around, hunting trouble, Mody stayed home in his little cabin behind the blacksmith shop. Not that Mody was afraid, for he wasn't. He was just being sensible. And he didn't want to get into a brawl that would add to Joe Powers' troubles. Besides, Mody wanted to think.

He was still thinking and not getting anywhere much, when, about nine o'clock, Joe Powers came in without knocking. The grizzled old sheriff looked grim and harassed. "I came mighty near doing it," he growled. "I came within an ace of doing it. If they hadn't quit rawhiding me right when they did, I shore would have done it."

"Done what?" asked Mody.

"Yanked this star off and throwed it in their faces," exploded Joe Powers vehemently. "What the hell do they expect of a man, anyhow?"

Mody unearthed bottle and glasses. "Pour a snort of this into you, Joe," he soothed. "And then tell me who was doing the rawhiding?"

"Ed Scally, Bill Stacy and Sam Englebright. They came over to my office in a bunch. And Stacy as much as said plain out that it looked like maybe the Steuben boys were right about me being a worthless old coot who was just hanging on to the sheriffin' job as long as a bunch of soft headed voters would let me. What's Stacy got to holler about, anyhow? Them holdups didn't hurt him none."

Mody Burnside was a practical man. He saw that Joe Powers was all on edge and ready to do something rash. So he set out deliberately to get enough liquor into Joe to get him good and sleepy. When this happened, he got Joe over on to his spare bunk and spread a blanket over him when Joe began to snore. Then Mody turned in across the room and resumed his thinking.

So Bill Stacy was taking up the cudgel, eh! That was serious. As owner of the Greystone City Bank, Bill Stacy was a pretty important man in the affairs of the county. He could swing a lot of influence. With the backing of men like Sam Englebright and Ed Scally he could come close to forcing Joe Powers to turn in his star and resign. And then see that just about whoever he wanted would be put in Joe's place. Yeah, things were getting serious.

In a way, Mody could see Bill Stacy's viewpoint. True, neither of these stage holdups had hurt Bill Stacy. Or Sam Englebright or even Ed Scally real badly for that matter. Yet, if the word got out, and it was sure to, that stage holdups were being carried on with impunity in Gallatin County, Nevada, other wild gentry would come drifting in, and maybe get the idea of trying a holdup on Bill Stacy's bank, or Sam Englebright's store. Or wait until Ed Scally had a valuable Wells Fargo box going out on the stage and knock that over. And these holdups weren't going to help the reputation of Ed Scally's stage line one little bit. Yeah, Mody could see why the above three men were getting uneasy over the matter.

And it really wasn't Joe Powers' fault, either. A man could do only so much. And when a trail ran out—why it ran out. Yet, folks didn't want excuses from a sheriff; they wanted results.

Joe Powers needed these last four years as sheriff. He needed them to finish paying for the little spread he had over on Red Bank. Once he had that paid for, he wouldn't have a thing to worry about. He'd always be able to scratch out a living there.

Yesterday's cheers, mused Mody a trifle bitterly just before he went to sleep, had such a short echo. Joe Powers had been a good sheriff; one of the best. But people would forget about that. That was the way the world was.

THINGS ran along pretty quiet for the next two weeks. Joe Powers was out pounding trail early and late, but with no success. And Worthy Pope rolled the stage back and forth from Greystone City to Humboldt without any further trouble. And, inasmuch as nobody had been really hurt in the two holdups, except the drummer who had lost two hundred dollars in the first one, criticism of Joe Powers began to fade. Yet, somehow Mody felt that this was all the quiet before the real storm.

Mody had thought and figured until his brain was tired. Mainly in trying to guess who the four holdups could have been. He tried suspecting everybody he knew. But he couldn't figure out a combination of four. He suspected the Steuben boys right off the bat. But that didn't work out, either. For there were only three of then, at most. Besides, when Worthy Pope had come speeding into town to report the first holdup, Claus Steuben had been in the Twilight bar, shaking dice with Frank Martin for the drinks. And both times the getaway trail had shown four broncs.

Worthy Pope had admitted to seeing only one holdup the last time and two the time before. Well, that didn't mean much because the others were probably hid out somewhere close by, guarding and watching and ready to take a hand if needed. The more he thought, the more Mody realized what a dead-end Joe Powers was up against.

One morning Mody slept a little late and when he finally got around to opening his shop he found Claus Steuben waiting for him with half a dozen cavvy broncs on lead. When Claus saw the guard go up in Mody's eyes, he laughed.

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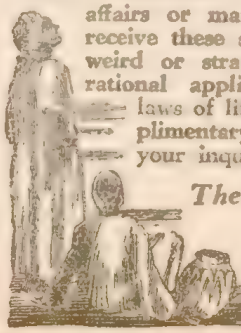

The ROSICRUCIANS
(AMORC)
San Jose, California

"You're wrong, Mody," Claus said. "I ain't even thinking about the larruping you gave Fritz and Dub. The darned fools had it coming. Frank Martin told me how Fritz shoved the hard word right at you. If he hadn't been hitting the booze he'd have known better. You just did what I'd have done under the same set up. So —forget it. I have. How's chances of having these bangtails shod all around?"

"Good enough," said Mody. "How do you want 'em—smooth or calked?"

"Smooth. Calks got no place on a parting out bronc. Slows 'em up on fast turns. How long?"

Mody glanced at the sun. "Probably won't be able to get done before noon grub. I'll work straight through, though."

"No need of that. I'll be back around three."

"They'll be done," promised Mody.

Mody found he had just enough smooth shoes left to go round and he made a note of it to have Sam Englebright order him another keg of them. He didn't have much call for smooth shoes. Most of the riders preferred small calks. But Claus Steuben seemed sold on smooth shoes. Smooth shoes.

Mody jerked his stocky body erect, a sharp gleam coming into his eyes. He stared for a long minute at the block of white sunlight outlined by the door of his shop, and he muttered to himself very slowly, "I wonder. . . . I wonder. . . ."

Decision gripped him and he went to work. Anyone who knew how Mody Burnside worked would have been surprised at the extreme care he put into this job. Some of the broncs still had on the old shoes, though worn very thin. One was barefoot on the two front and the near hind foot. One had an off hind and an off front shoe gone. And a third had both front gone.

Each shoe that Mody removed he studied very carefully and gave extreme care in fashioning the one to replace it. The more or less barefoot broncs he led back and forth across the shop several times, studying the way the animals threw those bare hoofs.

He worked hard, for he wanted to get the job done by the time he had promised. Sweat streamed down his face and throat and chest and several times he thought longingly of a cool glass or two of Frank Martin's beer. But that could come later. Right now Mody Burnside was riding a hunch and riding it hard. He worked straight through as he had promised Claus Steuben he would and the final nail was driven and clenched and the hoof rasped smooth by two o'clock. Then Mody doused head and arms in a bucket of cold water, scrubbed and toweled, took off his leather apron and headed for the Twilight.

Claus Steuben was there, playing solitaire. "All set, Claus," said Mody. "Have a beer with me?"

"Sure," said Claus. "How much do I owe you?"

"Fifteen smackers. Two and a half a bronc."

"Fair enough," said Claus as he paid.

They had three beers, Claus buying the second round and Frank Martin setting up the third on the house. Then Claus went after his broncs and a moment or two later jingled by with them on the lead, heading out for home.

Mody said, "Ever play a hunch, Frank?"

"Once," grunted Frank Martin sleepily. "Something told me I was going to fill on an inside straight. I didn't and it cost me forty bucks. Since then, when I get a hunch, I do just the opposite. It's cheaper in the long run. How about a couple of games of checkers? Four bits a game."

"Break 'em out," assented Mody cheerfully. "I've done enough work for today."

WORTHY POPE always brought his stage down the grade outside of town with pretty much of a flourish. But never at the wild, break-

neck speed that stage was traveling now. A rider was standing idly in the doorway of the Twilight. "Worthy must have picked up a bottle in Humboldt," he said. "He's bringing the stage in like hell was less than half a jump behind."

Frank Martin went to take a look and stayed there until the stage spun into town and came to a screeching halt before the Wells Fargo office.

"Hell!" he gulped. "That ain't Worthy Pope driving! That's Rube Kyle, the nester from Burnt Corral. Something's happened!"

And Frank, his white barkeep's apron streaming, led the cowboy in a race for the stage.

A crowd gathered quickly. Mody Burnside was there and Joe Powers came hurrying from his office. Rube Kyle was white as a sheet, his eyes sticking out, his Adam's apple running up and down his scrawny throat in agitated jerks.

"The driver!" he gulped. "He's inside. Shot! Dead, I think!"

This was true. Worthy Pope lay in a huddle on the stage floor. He was dead, all right. Shot through and through, heart high. Ed Scally grabbed Rube Kyle by the front of his shirt and shook him savagely.

"Spit it out!" Scally snarled. "How come? What do you know about this?"

Rube Kyle's story came out in jerks and gulps. His old milk cow, it appeared, had strayed. He had gone after the critter on foot, following the tracks. The trail led farther than he had figured, clear over to where the stage road cut across the flats to the north of Burnt Corral. He had just found the cow and put a lead rope on her when he'd heard a single shot, back on the road. There had been some dust drifting up there, like when the stage passed. Now the dust stopped showing. It was kind of queer so he thought he'd better investigate. He did. The stage was there all right, and Worthy Pope was lying crumpled down in the dust, right by the right front wheel. The only thing Kyle could

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think of doing was to get Worthy Pope inside and bring the stage in as fast as he could where a doctor could maybe help Worthy. No, Kyle hadn't seen hide nor hair of anybody else about the stage. And he hadn't stopped to look for sign.

There was no question of the truthfulness of Kyle. The nester was giving the simple facts. Ed Scally whirled on Joe Powers.

"Well, here it is, Powers. It was bound to happen sooner or later, with you letting a bunch of damned holdups and killers run free and loose around the country. Worthy Pope was a good man and he'd have been alive today if you'd have done yore duty like yore office calls for. Don't come whining back that you couldn't hold the trail this time."

But Joe Powers wasn't listening. He was heading for the livery barn and Mody Burnside was hurrying along behind. While the old sheriff saddled one bronc, Mody saddled another. And when Powers spurred for his office, Mody whaled along behind. Joe Powers got a scabbarded rifle and Mody slung a spare one to his own saddle. "I'm going along, Joe," he said quietly. "Something tells me you're going to need help."

"Liable to be a damned long ride," Powers said harshly. "I ain't showing in this town again until I bring them rats with me."

The crowd watched silently as Mody and Joe Powers galloped out of town.

IT WAS easy enough to find the place where the tragedy had taken place. There was where Worthy Pope's body had been, with the dark stain underneath. Joe Powers wasted little time there. Instead he began casting back and forth in the brush on the north side of the road and presently found what he was looking for. The sign of four horses, and heading straight out to the north where the Greystone Mountains bulked against the sky, a full twenty miles distant.

"Same crowd," rasped Joe Powers. "Headin' for the same place. If you're going with me, you better get back in yore saddle and ride. I ain't wasting any time."

Mody Burnside was out of his saddle just now, following those tracks on foot, leading his own bronc. Even as Joe Powers spoke, Mody dropped on one knee above a patch of smooth earth and studied that earth intently. When he straightened up, a triumphant glint was in his eyes.

"I'll have to tell Frank Martin about a hunch that panned out," he said. "Frank don't believe in hunches, you know, Joe."

"Damn yore hunches," snarled Joe Powers. "Are you coming or ain't you?"

"Sure I'm coming," said Mody. "I want to be in on the round-up."

"If there is a round-up," said Joe Powers bitterly. "They're heading for that hardpan country again, and you'll see how the trail runs out there."

"They'll never get to the hardpan," said Mody. "They ain't got time. You can't get no speed out of a lame bronc. Let's go!"

The trail lay plain enough so that it could be followed at a driving lope, and the miles began to roll backward. They were long miles to Mody Burnside. Of late years he had done far more sitting in one of Frank Martin's chairs than he had a racking, pounding saddle. Mody began to chafe and his back and legs started to ache. But he set his teeth and stayed with it.

The slope of the country was gradually up and the laboring broncs began to foam. They crested a low ridge and Joe Powers seemed about to rein in and give his mount a breather. But Mody yelled sharply to him.

"Keep up the pace. These broncs are just sweating. Their's will be sweating and limping, both. Keep driving!"

Joe Powers drew alongside. "What the hell is all this fool talk about their broncs beginning to limp?" he shouted. "How do you know?"

"I know," answered Mody. "I ought to."

On the east side of them their shadows were streaming longer and longer. The sun would be setting within the hour. And the Greystones were still a long way off. The grim look on Joe Powers' face took on a sullen hopelessness. This thing bore all the ear-marks of his finish as sheriff. Ed Scally, Bill Stacy and Sam Englebright would be after his job proper, now. And they'd get it.

"There they are!" yelped Mody. "See 'em, Joe. Out there where that line of brush loops past those rocks. Two of 'em. I'll bet the third is in town right now, to make the alibi look good. Dig in the spurs! They're trying to swap saddles to their relay broncs—and they won't have time!"

Evidently Fritz and Dub Steuben realized this also, for, rifle in hand, they sped for the shelter of that group of rocks. And their rifles began to snarl and long range lead whistled by.

Joe Powers seemed a trifle bewildered, but Mody Burnside wasn't. "Cut to yore right, Joe," he yelled. "Ride a big loop and come down on 'em from above. I'll hold 'em from this side. Get going!"

Those distant rifles yammered again and this time the lead whistled close enough to stir Joe Powers plenty. Those rifles were getting the range. Joe spurred wide to his right and Mody hustled his mount into a sag ahead and out of sight of those dangerous rocks.

Mody left his heaving mount there and, rifle in hand, went on ahead, thankful for the cover of the brush. He finally found a spot from which he could watch those rocks. Four hundred—maybe four-fifty—yards away, he judged. He ratched the rear sight up a couple of notches, pulled down on one of the rocks and let drive. The shot was a source of double satisfaction. He saw the dust jump up from his target, so he knew he had the range right. And he brought a flurry of shots

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in reply, which told him that the quarry was still holed up.

There were four broncs up by those rocks. Three were standing still. The fourth moved off to one side a trifle, moving with a distinct limp. Mody grinned tightly. "More than one way to skin a cat," he muttered.

From where he lay hidden, Mody could not follow the progress of Joe Powers until Joe finally showed, way up the slope above the rocks. And then Joe, quite calmly and deliberately, it seemed, began to search that rock pile with lead. Mody buzzed a few from his side.

Abruptly the running figure of a man darted out, racing for those four broncs. He swung astride one of them and spurred the animal into a lurching, limping run. And then Joe Powers shot again.

Mody heard the bullet hit, with a deep, sullen thud.

The mounted figure reeled and went off in a heap. A second figure scuttled into view, on Mody's side of the rock pile and Mody drew down carefully for the shot. But he did not press the trigger, for that figure had both hands up and empty, high above his head.

Mody left the brush and went toward that figure. There would not be a third of the renegades—not here. That third one would be in Greystone City, so the alibi would be complete. Joe Powers, seeing Mody in the open, came down fast.

Dub Steuben's youth was working on him. He was white faced, his pale eyes glazed with fear. He looked ready to blubber. "Fritz did it," he gulped. "Fritz shot him."

"You're talking about Worthy Pope, of course," said Mody harshly.

Dub Steuben could only nod, wordless.

Fritz Steuben was dead. Joe Powers' shot had been a bull's-eye. Dub Steuben took one look at his brother and went all to pieces.

"We'll have to leave him here," said Mody, pointing at Fritz Steuben. "Come out for him later. We got to get back to town before the third one gets suspicious and drifts. I'll take the kid up with me."

"I don't savvy these four broncs," sputtered Joe Powers. "Four of 'em and all dead lame. That don't make sense."

"It makes plenty of sense," said Mody. "But we got no time to argue about it now. That can wait. Let's travel before the main bird flies."

THE TWILIGHT was crowded. Ed Scally, Sam Englebright, Bill Stacy were there, and Joe Powers was on the pan, proper. Claus Steuben leaned against the bar and listened, and far back in his pale eyes was a glint of satisfaction. This was what he wanted.

Mody Burnside and Joe Powers came in. The room grew still. Then Ed Scally said, "You're soon back, Powers. We're in no mood to hear a yarn about a trail running out on the hardpan today."

"The trail," said Joe Powers with slow distinctness, "runs out right here. Right here in the Twilight."

Claus Steuben was faster in the head than he looked. His instinct screamed at him and he made a leap for the door, dragging a gun as he went. He was fast enough that he would have gotten Joe Powers. But Mody Burnside flipped up the rifle he was carrying and shot from the hip.

It was as though the heart of a hurricane had struck Claus Steuben. He spun like a dervish and went down, dead when he hit the floor.

"That's the last of them," said Mody grimly. "And one of them, Dub, is alive and more than anxious to talk and save his neck. You mealy mouthed old women wanted results. You got 'em. No mistake. Come on, Joe, we got errands to do."

Later they sat in Joe Powers' office, Joe and Mody Burnside, two old friends. The job was done. Dub Steuben was safely locked in the jail behind the office. The bodies of Claus and Fritz Steuben were in the Coroner's

hands. And there were men about town who were wondering how Joe Powers had done it. Joe was wondering himself. There was a bottle and two glasses and Joe poured one more drink.

"All right," he said. "I want to know."

"Fair enough," said Mody. "Here's what started me thinking. A week ago when Claus Steuben brought in half a dozen saddle broncs for me to shoe he said he wanted 'em shod smooth—no calks. That give me my hunch. I thought of that hardpan and the tracks running out on it. The tracks of smooth-shod broncs would do that. Had there been even short calks on the shoes of those broncs they'd have left sign, even on the hardpan. That was the first thread. I took a gamble. I shod those broncs smooth—but not too smooth. I used extra big-headed nails, which, before they had time to wear smooth, would show in the shoe marks. Then I did something else. Horses are like humans in some respects. One is, no two of 'em handle their feet exactly alike. I looked over the worn shoes still on those broncs. I saw the high spots and the low spots. I walked 'em around the shop. When I shod 'em fresh I worked the shoes so they would pitch each hoof opposite to its favored angle. That put a strain on the joints and tendons, same as it would on you, were yore boot soles to be built up throwing yore weight just opposite to what you were accustomed. Should you try to travel any distance with boots fixed so, you'd soon be so stove up you wouldn't be able to wiggle.

"Now, long as those broncs weren't rode full out for any distance, that strain wouldn't bother 'em enough to make 'em lame. But you run 'em fast for five, six miles and they stove up fast. That was my hunch and I rode it. It worked out. And one thought led to another. Remember the first hold-up? Worthy Pope said he saw only two bandits that time. Well, he did, for that day, if you recall, Claus Steu-

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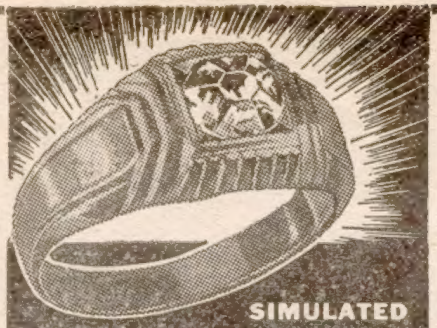

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ben was here in town when the job was pulled. The second holdup, Worthy saw only one. Claus did that job alone, for that day Fritz and Dub were in town. And today once more, Claus was in town while Fritz and Dub did the job."

"Then the four broncs that the sign always showed, they were just a blind," mumbled Joe Powers.

"Right," said Mody. "A blind. And when they hit the hardpan they'd send the spare broncs hellity-larrup off in opposite directions and ride another one themselves. They knew those spare broncs would find their way home, and you couldn't follow because the smooth-shod hoofs would make no sign on the hardpan. Today, when I was looking things over so careful down by the road, I was looking for those big nail heads showing with the sign. When I found that, then I knew we were right and I knew we'd find some lame broncs and the guys ridin' 'em not too far ahead, provided we kept 'em pushed to a hard run."

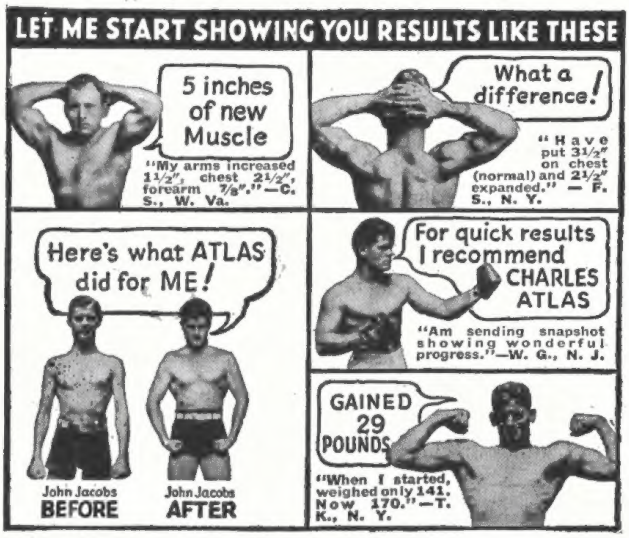
"If Fritz and Dub had made the usual getaway today, my job would have been gone," mused Joe Powers. "Gone, shore as hell."

"Right. And Claus Steuben would have gotten it. That's what the Steubens were aiming for. And with Claus as sheriff, then they could have pulled some real holdups where the loot was fat. And who would have suspected?"

Joe wagged his grizzled head. "Beats me," he mumbled. "Beats me all to hell how you did it. I never thought there was that much science to shoein' a bronc."

Keep It Waving . Buy Bonds

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a *New Man?*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Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest **in competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.**

This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is an actual untouched snapshot.

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I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you. And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength in to your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

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"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural **method** that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—**my way.** I give you **no gadgets or contraptions to fool with.** When you have learned to develop your strength through **"Dynamic Tension,"** you can laugh at **artificial** muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid LIVE MUSCLE.

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FOOT ITCH
ATHLETE'S FOOT

WHY TAKE CHANCES?

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy the germ, whereas, upon contact, laboratory tests show that H. F. will kill the germ Tinea Trichophyton within 15 seconds.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. H. F. gently peels the skin, which enables it to get to parasites which exist under the outer cuticle.

ITCHING OFTEN RELIEVED QUICKLY

As soon as you apply H. F. you may find that the itching is relieved. You should paint the infected part with H. F. night and morning until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days.

H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief. It costs you nothing to try, so if you are troubled with Athlete's Foot why wait a day longer.

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us $1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

PAY NOTHING TILL RELIEVED
SEND COUPON

At least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is both contagious and infectious it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

GORE PRODUCTS, Inc. ACE

832 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you $1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

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